

MASADA

**MASS SUICIDE IN THE FIRST
JEWISH-ROMAN WAR, c. AD 73**

PHIL CARRADICE



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Judea during the First Jewish-Roman War. (Map by George Anderson)

INTRODUCTION

The story of the Masada massacre is something that has always fascinated me. Perhaps as a loyal and passionate Welshman it was the idea of a small nation, outnumbered and patronized by a larger, more powerful neighbour that first made me identify with the ancient defenders of that hilltop fortress. Perhaps it was just the example of perfect courage in the face of overwhelming odds that appealed. Whatever the reason, the fascination remains.

Masada—the story, its location, its symbolism—has always been an essential part of Israel. As an outsider, a visitor and a writer, I find it impossible to separate the two.

Israel is a disconcerting country. Geographically it is tiny: about the size of New Jersey as I was repeatedly told during a recent visit. Yet the people bristle with a self-confidence that borders on arrogance and is totally at odds with the physical limitations of the country. Given what the Jewish people have endured over the years, both inside and outside Israel, such an attitude is understandable. You don't survive pogroms, anti-Semitic riots and murder without having a hard inner core within a hard exterior shell.

Even now, many years after the creation of the Israeli state, the region is still a war zone where the threat of bomb, bullet and missile remains strong. And yet the people battle on, defiant and determined, against what can often seem to be insurmountable odds. There is a sense of purpose to the country and to its inhabitants who, regardless of their political stance or view on the Masada legend, still cling to the concept and idea that 'Masada shall not fall again'. And for Masada you should read Israel.

Having said that, if there is one adjective that can be used to describe the country it has to be fragile. The peace, such as it is, remains fragile; the standing of the Israeli nation is equally as fragile in a world where fundamentalism of any denomination is viewed with suspicion; even the climate of the country is fragile and troubled.

On my first visit to research and explore the atmosphere of the place for this book on the Masada story, I failed to reach the mountaintop preserve of Herod and the Sicarii. It was frustrating and annoying but, somehow, it summed up the tenuous nature of the

country and the people. I probably need to explain. Rain began to fall as we arrived in Jerusalem and pretty soon the whole city seemed to be under water. Cars aquaplaned down the hill alongside the old walls of the town; several of them were abandoned, water up to their windows and roof tops; pedestrians were left isolated on traffic islands or embankments with no alternative but to strip to their waists and wade home.

The following morning it was still raining, not ordinary rain but rain of biblical proportions. As we boarded the bus and tentatively set out for Masada, the rain only increased. It was as if we were witnessing the first morning of creation. At Qumran it was still raining and there we received news that hit home like a shell burst. The road to Masada was closed. It had been washed away in a flash flood as rain water hammered down from the surrounding hillsides. It seemed that thirteen people, ten of them young students, had been swept away and killed in the flood. This was not the first century, this was the twenty-first, but still the flooding had crippled transport and travel in this particular piece of Israel.

Fragile is certainly the word to describe so many aspects of Israeli life. That fragility is what helps to make the people strong. And if ever history can be used to reflect the mood and character of a nation it can be found in the story of the siege of Masada.

The Masada massacre is a tale of courage and determination, from both sides, Jewish and Roman alike. If you want to gain some understanding of the Jewish and Israeli character, let alone the mechanical and terrifying nature of the Roman war machine, you can do a lot worse than study the events of the first Romano-Jewish War. In particular, the dramatic and deadly encounter between two driven and dynamic regimes at the hilltop fortress of Masada remains one of the most riveting and spectacular stories of the last two thousand years. Put quite simply, there is nothing else like it.

A brief note on dating

These days the old method of dating events to BC (Before Christ) and AD (anno Domini) has been largely superseded by BCE and CE. The two terms stand for Before Common Era and Common Era, thereby removing the dating of events from a purely Christian ethos and accepting the fact that there are other religions within the world. Faced by the choice of which system to use, I have decided on the new BCE and CE option. In a dozen years from now we will all be using that method when hopefully this book will still be in print.

1. THE CONTESTANTS

General Lucius Flavius Silva was hot and uncomfortable. The heat rash on his chest and in his groin itched and ached alternately. No amount of balm would ease the pain and he knew that when he put on his uniform and armour it would be ten times worse. It came to him suddenly that he was also bored, totally bored; mind-blowingly, perhaps even terminally bored. So much of that boredom, he realized, was based on hatred.

He hated the desert and the rough coarse sand that seemed to find its way into every orifice in his body. He hated the heat of the day, the coldness of the night. He hated his soldiers and their lumpen, mindless acceptance of orders that were equally as mindless. He hated the food he had to eat and the discomfort of sweat rashes all over his body. The sudden and disabling attacks of giddiness that seemed to have no cause or origin simply added to his state of unease.

More than anything he hated the knowledge that tomorrow and every day after that would bring more of the same mind-numbing routines. They were routines and practices that had once been so attractive but had now been relegated simply to the slow passage of time.

And yet he knew that he still had his duty to perform. He was still consumed by a passionate desire to destroy the men and women up on the rock. He had nothing against them personally. They were just the enemy, a problem to be faced and overcome, but as long as they sat there in that damned great fortress he would have to camp here and wait. And that was hard.

Lucius Silva cursed the deserts of Judea and the stubborn courage of the people he knew only as enemies. He could admire their purpose and resolve but the longer they held out, those men up there on the top of Masada, the longer he would be kept away from Rome. He had already been here, in this wilderness of rock and sand, for more months than he cared to contemplate.

“By all the gods,” he muttered to himself as he threw open the tent flap and stood gazing up at the huge bulk of Masada, “what I would give to be free like Vespasian or Titus.”

Vespasian and Titus, his predecessors—he hissed the names

venomously. When he thought about it he realized that he hated them even more than he did the Jewish rebels. Both of them, father and son alike, had simply given up command of the legions here in Judea when it suited them, abandoned the governorship of the country, and taken ship back to Rome. And that left poor fools like him to shoulder the burden of dealing with a recalcitrant and rebellious people who had no awareness of the finer things in life, people who understood only the whip and the sword.

Rome expected too much, he decided; Vespasian and Titus expected too much. But then, Vespasian had already installed himself as emperor and it was looking more and more likely that his son Titus would soon follow in his father's footsteps. God help Rome should that ever happen.

"Perhaps I should take the chance," he thought, "and march on Rome myself."

But he knew that he did not have the nerve. Nor the ambition, come to that. All he wanted was to be away from this desert with its hot winds and swirling sand. He wanted—more desperately every day—to be sitting in the cool marble colonnades of his house outside Rome, the air filled with the scent of roses and jasmine. He wanted to be able to bathe every morning, to cover and scrape his body with sweet-smelling oils and then ride out onto the hills and gaze down at the wonderful and elegant city that he loved.



Roman armour, shown here on a manikin lodged in a Romanian museum. The armour was effective but hot and heavy in desert climates.

“Sir, if you please, sir?”

Silva’s head jerked round. He was not used to having his thoughts interrupted—and certainly not by someone like the dirt-engrained

soldier who now stood before him.

“Centurion Maximus requests if you will give him a moment of your time, general?”

Silva followed the man through the camp. The dust and sand had spread everywhere like a fine woollen blanket that threatened to suffocate and choke any unsuspecting new arrivals. Even the occasional downpour of rain failed to disperse the covering; it just seemed to batter it into the ground and when the storm was over it resurfaced again. The rain here, Silva thought, was as brutal as the landscape—hard and unyielding—not like the sweet-smelling, refreshing showers of Italy.

Overlaying everything, a rumbling like a distant thunderstorm told him that the business of soldiering and labouring had not stopped. Tired men sweating, straining and cursing under their loads were still going about their daily tasks. It was and always would be constant; whatever else might be happening in the world, the work would still go on.

He paused as a gang of labourers shuffled past, each of them carrying a granite boulder on his thin and scrawny shoulders. They were mostly Jews, captured in battle and now co-opted as forced labour, brought in to carry out the hard manual work on the ramp. His soldiers stood by with their whips, urging and bullying the workers. It was a pointless exercise: nothing could make the weak and emaciated labourers move faster or carry heavier loads. Still, it made the legionaries feel better about this posting and at least they didn’t have to do the work themselves.

Silva knew that the legionaries did not like the manual work that was usually their lot—breaking rocks for roads, digging ditches around besieged towns, making and breaking camp every night and morning. They were killers, trained killers who looked down on anyone not of their profession. They did not complain, not officially, but, by the gods, did they grumble.

So the use of the Jewish prisoners to carry the wood and stones, to pummel down the earth of the ramp until it was solid as a rock, had been a good decision on his part. He didn’t expect thanks from his soldiers, did not care about their feelings in any way but if it made his life easier and stopped their glances of constant resentment he was happy.

Silva coughed up a mouthful of phlegm and spat it onto the dust. It was, he decided, like living in a quarry and thought again about his house at Praenesta amongst the lemon groves on the hills outside Rome. He shook his head to clear it—time for such thoughts when the

day was done.

Maximus, one of the engineers in charge of building, stood at the foot of the ramp, tapping angrily and impatiently with his vine cane at the pteruges* on his skirts. He had removed his cuirass, the armoured breastplate, and helmet and, despite the early hour, two dark rings of sweat under his armpits had already stained his tunic. As he saw Silva approach he straightened and saluted.

Silva glared at him. “Well, you wanted me?”



The Masada siege ramp seen from below.

The old centurion wiped the sweat from his forehead and moved closer to the general. Silva could smell the unhealthy odour of the man's body, wrinkled his nose in disgust and managed to resist the temptation to step back.

“Come on, man, out with it. Is there anything wrong with the ramp?”

Maximus pulled himself up to his full height. “Nothing, sir, nothing at all; a week or so more and it should be finished, if the gods are willing.”

Something about the man's tone set an alarm bell tolling in his head and he glared at the centurion. He did not speak but waited for the soldier to continue.

“The prisoners are dropping like flies, sir,” Maximus shrugged. “The work's too hard for half-starved men who aren't interested in getting the job done in the first place. We need to use the soldiers, sir, if you want to get this ramp finished in double quick time. The idle bastards have had a right good holiday these past few weeks.”

Silva ignored the criticism implicit in the centurion's voice and turned to stare up the long length of the ramp. Siege ramps were nothing unusual. Caesar had built one at the siege of Avaricum, a wooden and earth structure that had filled in the depression around the town and allowed his legions to storm the place with ease. And at Jerusalem Titus had also built ramps against the city walls—he reckoned that there wasn't a tree left standing within twenty miles when they finally broke in and put the place to the torch.



The layout of one of the Roman encampments, as seen from the heights of Masada. (Matson coll. / LoC)

But his ramp, here at Masada, was special. There had never been a siege ramp quite like it. Rising 200 feet from the bottom of the cliff to the upper section of the fortress walls, when it was finished it would be nearly 1,000 feet long. Built from stone and pounded earth and reinforced with timber bracings, it had been the idea of Maximus and the other engineers to site it here on a natural promontory. Silva could see that ridge of rock now, the white stone clearly showing up like slithers of marble against the dark earth. That promontory must have saved them weeks of work.

“You said the ramp would be finished in a week or so. Have you changed your mind?”

Maximus shook his head. “No, general. It will be finished ... if you

give me more fit and able men. Not these damned Jewish prisoners.”

“Are they complaining?” Silva asked. “If so, use the whip, man.”

“They’re not complaining, general. But they are dying.”

Silva cursed silently, knowing that Maximus was right. They were a valuable resource, these prisoners. It wasn’t just building the ramp: he needed the Jews to carry supplies and equipment to this godforsaken and isolated spot. Reluctantly he nodded. “Use the auxiliaries first, then the allies. After that, if you need more, go to the legion.”

He turned and strode away without waiting for a response from Maximus. The man’s body odour was one thing, his skill as an engineer and overseer were something else. They had worked together before, many times, and he trusted the old veteran to carry out his orders. But even so, the exchange had put him into a bad mood.

“My bath,” he bellowed at his Numidian slave when he got back to his tent and watched as the man scurried away to do his bidding.

It was one of his few luxuries, this beautiful old campaign bath. Made of bronze with carved rams’ heads—looking decidedly old and battered now—the bath had been with him wherever the campaigns of the empire had taken him. Scratched and dented, it was still his best companion. Of course it could not compete with the bath houses of Rome or even Jerusalem come to that, but it did give him some brief moments of comfort and security.

Silva lay back, luxuriating in the hot water. It would not be much longer now. The ramp was nearing completion; detailing in soldiers to help with the work would be bound to finish it quicker. Then it would be a simple matter of an assault with the catapults and the battering ram before putting all of the Jewish bastards inside the fortress to the sword. He made a mental note to check on the progress of the ram. Like the ramp it must be nearing completion now and the sooner work on it was finished the sooner it could be put to use.

“I will leave a garrison up there, on Masada,” he whispered to the silent room “so no one else will have to sit here and suffer as I have done.”

He smiled to himself, pleased with his magnanimity, ducked his head under the water and held his breath. He surfaced amidst streams of bubbles and gushing water. Then he climbed out of the bath. The towels were warm and welcoming and he felt better than he had done in days.

*

Standing on the tallest of the watchtowers along the casement wall, Eleazar ben Ya’ir gazed out over the surrounding landscape. His view

took in the rocks, the desert sand and the gleaming waters of the inland sea that bordered them. Inevitably, however, his eyes were drawn back to the long narrow ramp of earth and stones that stretched from the floor of the valley almost to the fortress wall below his feet.

“Not the most beautiful looking thing the Romans have ever built,” he said, smiling at the soldiers at his side.

The men followed his gaze down to the partially completed siege ramp. They were simple men, unimaginative and stolid. But they knew what the ramp signified.

“I don’t suppose it was ever meant to be beautiful,” one replied, “but I expect it will do the job it was intended for.”

Eleazar stifled a laugh. The man was probably right: they would all know within a day or so. Staring down at the people working on the ramp he suddenly realized just how close the structure had now come. He could have sworn that he was able to see the eyebrows on one man and an angry red boil that stood out like a painted beauty spot on the neck of another one. A great target for a skilled archer, he thought, amazed that even at this late stage he could still find things like that quite funny.



The remains of the siege ramp from above. The ramp was renovated in the 1970s for the making of a TV drama about the siege.

"I think we have a week, perhaps," said one of the men at his side, "maybe a little longer. Then they will be on us." He pointed to the top of the ramp. "A platform, that's what they'll use, from there over to our wall. Don't you agree? When you see that being moved into place best you start saying your prayers, Eleazar ben Ya'ir. I know I will."

Eleazar shrugged and moved into the shade. He sat on a wooden bench, head in hands, and did not reply. Eventually the men drifted away, leaving him to his thoughts. They were right, he decided: a week at most. Already he could see the tall outline of a siege tower beginning to take shape in the space between the legionary camp and the start of the ramp. Soldiers were working on it, nailing sheets of some material to its wooden frame.

"The end is nigh," Eleazar said and sighed.

Nobody answered; there was nobody there apart from him. He wondered, briefly, where everyone had gone. Spending time with their families, he decided. That was fair enough, as long as the sentries were still in place and provided everyone would come running to the walls if the alarm should be sounded.

The emptiness and lack of movement inside the fortress were disconcerting, a far cry from earlier days when the Romans had hurled stones and arrows over the walls as they began the work on their ramp, anything to keep the heads of the defenders well down and out of the way. Now they seemed to be treating the fortress of Masada and its soldiers with disdain. Their ramp was almost complete; there was no need to keep defenders bent low, not any longer.

He pulled himself to his feet and walked to the edge of the tower. He rested his hands on the wooden rail and stared down at the ramp. "How much longer are you going to be?" he called to the men who were toiling away, stamping down the earth, pummeling it with hammers and poles. It was amazing, the way sound carried up here. There had been times when he could plainly hear men talking in their tents in the valley floor below, cursing or complaining about their officers. Crisp, clean air, he supposed, did wonders for acoustics.

An old soldier on the top of the ramp stared up at him. He noted that, over the past week or so, Roman soldiers had replaced or been added to the gangs of Jewish prisoners who had built most of the siege ramp. Now, as he watched, the soldier—a centurion, he thought—straightened up and spread his arms wide. Eleazar had not expected an answer and the old man's response caught him by surprise.

"We'll be with you soon enough, my friend. Don't hurry us, we like to do a job properly."

Eleazar smiled down at the centurion. He spoke a sort of mongrel

or bastardized Hebrew but it was clear enough for Eleazar to understand.

“We’ll be waiting,” he shouted back. “And when you come, Roman, you’ll wish you were back on the banks of the Tiber, I can promise you that.”

The centurion waved dismissively and turned to talk to the men under his command. “Fellow up there wants to know how much longer we’re going to be. What do you reckon, lads?”

A loud bellow of laughter echoed out across the valley.

“Keen to die, is he?” said someone.

“Tell you what, my little Jewish friend,” shouted another, “you chuck me a rope and I’ll be up there right away—finish you off in a couple of seconds.”

Eleazar grinned to himself, waved and went down the ladder to the ground. The Romans were right: it would be over quickly. How many of them were there, he asked himself—10,000 at least. And what did he have? About a thousand if you included the women and children. He would have to do something and do it quickly: but what, that was the question.

Instinctively his hand closed around the sword at his side. It gave him brief comfort but then, almost without realizing it, his hand slid up into his tunic and his fingers closed over the handle of the sica, the sharp curved dagger that all Sicarii carried. It was their traditional weapon, the very term Sicarii coming from the name of the knife. No wonder the people of Palestine called them ‘the dagger men’. Now that, he told himself, was real comfort and security.



A sica, the traditional Sicarii dagger, lethal in the hands of a skilled assassin.

He walked slowly into what everyone knew as the large palace. It was one of two great palaces on the rock, built hundreds of years ago when the place was a home and a refuge to people like Herod the Great. Most of its grandeur had gone now but there was still a presence and a latent power to be found in the ruins of the old building.

It was a shame, the way the beautiful mosaics and wall tiles in the palace had been treated over the past few years. They had been smashed and broken, the pieces used as foundations for defences around the plateau, even as ammunition to hurl down on the Romans.

He smiled to himself, imagining the combat report or, better still, a letter home to the parents of a dead legionary: "I am sorry to report that your son was killed by a piece of blue-painted tile between the eyes." There seemed to be something prophetic about the idea, the death of a culture in the face of greater uncaring power.

The destruction had been barbaric, no doubt about that. But then, he and his men were here to fight—to fight and die—and the surroundings mattered very little. Another time, he thought, another time. And then he stopped himself. Be honest, he said under his breath, there will never be another time. This is all there ever will be; accept that and it will be much easier. He had known this time would come. They had all known, all of the Sicarii and the Zealots who had come to join him on Masada. Men, women and children, he knew the Romans would spare very few. Those who were not cut down by the Roman swords would be sold into slavery. The lucky ones would die quickly. He paused and looked around.

The palace was a hive of activity, women preparing food, men just lounging about and enjoying a moment of quiet contemplation before the inevitable. Groups of children rattled and tore along the corridors, the noise of their laughter echoing around the old palace.

He sat and watched two children playing, making houses and forts with the last of the mosaic tiles and pieces of pottery that they had levered out of the floors or found under the seats. The children couldn't have been more than four or five and they chattered happily, unaware of the danger that waited in the desert below and of what would come tomorrow or the next day.

"Just how it should be," Eleazar muttered to himself, glancing once more at the two children absorbed in their game. He bent low, grunting with the effort. "Catch," he called suddenly and tossed a large piece of ostraca at the children.

The elder of the two boys caught the shard of pottery and smiled

shyly at Eleazar. Then he went back to his construction game. Eleazar looked around him. Pieces of ostraca, some large, some small, littered the floor of the building. They had probably lain here, untouched, for dozens of years, he thought.

“I wonder,” he muttered, “maybe, just maybe.”

He pushed at a large piece of ostraca with his foot, then stooped and gathered up a dozen or so of the pottery pieces. He dropped them into his satchel and left the palace. The germ of an idea had begun to form in his mind. He would need to think it through but it could be the ultimate way to frustrate the Romans. He just needed time to think and plan. He strode across the open space outside the palace until he reached a room in the casement wall. He and the other leaders used it as a command post or an office but now the place was empty, everyone seizing the chance to be with their families while there was still time and opportunity.



A more famous forerunner, Simon the Zealot. (Russian Orthodox Church)

“God be with you my friends,” he said as he laid the pieces of

ostraca on the floor beside him. “Enjoy your time while you still have it.”

He knew now what he had to do. He was convinced it was right, the only way to show defiance to a bitter and deadly enemy. Whether or not he could convince the others, well that was a different matter altogether. It would, he thought, all depend on his skill as an orator.

* The leather lappets, or defensive skirt strips, worn from the waist.

2. NO MORE WORLDS TO CONQUER

It was probably Plutarch—although his authorship of the phrase has been questioned—who wrote the famous lines about Alexander the Great: “When Alexander saw the breadth of his domain he wept because there were no more worlds to conquer.”

The same epithet could be used of the emperors of Rome who by 117 CE ruled over the greatest empire the world had ever seen. Thousands of men, women and children depended on Rome for their safety and their livelihood. Even Alexander himself would have been envious.

The glib term *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) has been used to describe the benefits of the first two centuries of the empire but it is a misleading appellation. Tacitus, the great historian and recorder of the lives of the early emperors and their regimes, was realistic enough to comment that, “Rome creates a desert and calls it peace.”

The period saw a huge growth of conquered territories with the attendant benefits of wealth for the emperor, food for the populace of Rome and safety for the people of the empire. It also saw dozens of pitched battles and the fall of many kings and rulers. Peace, if indeed it was peace, came on Roman terms and with considerable Roman oversight.

As the most powerful enemy ever faced by the men and women of Judea, some knowledge of Rome and the Roman army is probably useful before looking in more detail at the siege and massacre at Masada. It would, at the very least, put the political and military manoeuvrings of the period into some sort of context.

*

Founded in approximately 800 BCE as a small village on the River Tiber, Rome gradually grew into a kingdom. There were many ups, many downs, periods of richness and success matched by times of poverty, defeat and depression.

In time that kingdom, ruled in turn by a series of effective and ineffective monarchs, came to dominate the whole of Italy. Eventually the Roman kings were expelled and the former fishing village morphed into the Republic of Rome. The Roman people were

avaricious and the republic inevitably began reaching out for trading opportunities. It was not many years before Rome was in control of the whole of the Mediterranean basin.



A Roman soldier with javelin and shield.

The Roman Republic lasted for nearly 500 years, from 500 to 31

BCE but despite its success it was still a period beset by conflict. A series of civil wars and political unrest culminated in Julius Caesar becoming the most important man in Italy, arguably even the world. Stunning military campaigns led to him destroying his rivals for ultimate control of the city and its vassal states. Eventually he was appointed perpetual dictator by the Senate but his assassination in 44 BCE led to his adopted son Octavian clawing his way to power.

In 27 BCE, after his defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra and the subsequent annexation of Egypt, the Senate granted Octavian “overarching power” and the name Augustus. The republic was dead and Augustus duly became the first Roman emperor.

The reign of Augustus, like the reigns of many of those who came after him, was marked by civil strife and revolt until each emperor was at last able to instil a degree of stability and security. And still the empire expanded and grew relentlessly, reaching its tentacles into modern-day Germany, France and Britain. Despite its internal problems, under imperial rule Rome had become master of the entire known world.

The tool with which the empire achieved such marked success was the Roman army. That army was a powerful, ruthless war machine whose success was based on two things: iron discipline for the troops and regulated, machine-like battle tactics that swept away everything that attempted to oppose it.

In the early days both of the kingdom and of the republic, the army had been based on an annual levy where the lower classes filled out the ranks of the infantry and the upper or patrician classes dominated the cavalry. At first there were only four legions with the first being by far the most prestigious. The fourth legion, incidentally, was written IIII, not the more usual IV.

The term legion comes from the Latin word *legio*, meaning draft or levy, reflecting perfectly the make-up of the early Roman army. Organized into ten maniples—or groups—of young, fit soldiers, ten maniples of older and more experienced veterans and ten maniples of cavalry, each legion usually consisted of about 4,500 men.

In the mid-Republican era, roughly 300 to 88 BCE, the Roman army became a fulltime standing force of 150,000 highly trained soldiers, backed up by a continued but limited use of the draft. The reason for this dramatic change in emphasis was simple. The development of an ever-increasing overseas empire in the years after the Second Punic War (218 to 201 BCE) demanded a readily available and efficient military force to protect the existing dominions, and, more importantly, to extend them wherever and whenever possible.

any campaigning Roman army would inevitably be augmented by Numidian light cavalry, by Cretan archers and Balearic slingers.

That reliance on mercenaries or auxiliary troops as they became known meant that the skill and expertise of the Roman soldiers was limited in the main to the work of heavy infantry. It was an effective way of honing specific skills and at the same time limiting the power of the legionaries—always a potential threat to any leader. Political power and status in Rome had come to depend more and more on military might, which was useful as long as people knew how to handle it and how to protect themselves from it should that ever become necessary.

By the time of the empire, the levy had gone and the imperial army had become a totally volunteer force with men enlisting for twenty years. If they wished they could serve longer and many did, some of them remaining in the ranks for up to forty years.

Under Emperor Augustus the army grew rapidly to 28 legions, all of them containing approximately 5,000 men. Occasionally the size of the legions extended to 5,500 but it was rare that any military unit, either during the republic or the empire, was able to meet its full quota.

Despite this, by 200 CE the army had grown again, increasing now to 33 legions, each of them made up of Roman citizens. It was an essential qualification that if you were not a Roman citizen you could not join a legion.

Auxiliary units (whose members enlisted for twenty-five years rather than the twenty of the legionaries) added to the army strength. These auxiliaries became Roman citizens when their years of service were over, with the result that, if they had survived the rigours of fighting in remote parts of the empire, all manner of benefits were suddenly available. The prize of Roman citizenship was much coveted and many of the children of these mercenary soldiers even went on to become legionaries.

The Romans were not great tacticians, relying on the discipline of the troops to hold fast when things were going badly. Their manoeuvres were invariably the same, variations when they were used being little more than slight adaptations of the main technique. Tactics were based on brute force, simply an advance towards the enemy regardless of the opponent's strength or the terrain over which they fought. The legions invariably fought as a tight compact unit, a solid wedge of men moving as one: "Even bad generals could win battles. The usual aim of the Legion was to smash through the centre of the enemy's line, shattering both his unity and his morale."*

At the start of a battle legionaries were assembled in closed ranks in the centre of the formation with units of allied troops and auxiliaries on their flanks. They were drawn up in lines, between two and eight deep with the men in the second line covering the gaps or spaces of the line in front and so on. When they charged they invariably dropped into open order but even so the shock of several hundred men running as fast as demons and hammering like a closed fist into rigid lines of defence was one that was usually enough to break most formations.

The charge was usually preceded by a hail of arrows and light javelins. Then it was time for the heavier pila, a weightier, more substantial javelin that had the strength and power to smash through armour as if it was paper. The 'softening-up' process was assisted by skirmishers who would make quick assaults on the enemy flanks.

Even if the javelins, light or heavy, did not strike a man they would probably embed themselves into the enemy shields, making them heavy and unwieldy. Someone struggling to free his shield of one or two javelins would hardly have his mind on the coming contact and was, therefore, an easier target. That was where the skirmishers, darting in and out of the enemy ranks, really came into their own.

The key to the Roman attack was the charge of the main army, the men urged forward by a trumpet signal. At that moment the battle dissolved into close-quarter combat. The short stabbing swords of the legionaries were lethal, particularly with a demoralized enemy already reeling from the weight of arrows and javelins that had been hurled against them. The result was, usually at least, victory for the Romans.

The Mediterranean was the artery of the Roman Empire, used for transportation and for trade. The Romans were no seamen but they soon established control of the Mediterranean by simply using army tactics at sea. It was an ingenious idea. In order to achieve this command of the sea they developed a boarding plank, secured by a pin through the end of the plank that clamped it to the deck but still allowed it to swivel. Mounted on the prow of each ship, the soldiers nicknamed the boarding ramp 'the raven' because of its birdlike shape. Nicknames apart, it was a simple but highly effective tool. The boarding plank was dropped onto the enemy ship once the two vessels had come alongside each other, allowing the legionaries to charge across the gap onto the other deck. Then the battle was fought just like a land encounter.†



Soldiers building a camp, shown here on a Roman victory column.

From the early days of the republic it was obvious that the borders of Rome's dominions needed to be protected. As those dominions grew, the need to defend them simply increased. Legions were therefore stationed at important locations along the borders of the empire, be that in Gaul, Germany, North Africa or Palestine. Permanent camps were created for these units of occupation, similar in design to the traditional temporary legionary encampment which could be erected and dismantled within the space of twenty-four hours. However, these permanent camps were larger than the legionary encampments, had stronger defences and tents were replaced with timber or stone buildings for the men.

The permanent encampments were like small townships, being virtually self-sufficient. Never likely to miss out on an opportunity to make money, traders flocked to the encampments, selling their goods to the soldiers and to the locals and all the time being protected by the legions.

It was not long before permanent shops, workshops and hospitals, even schools were built and established within the walls of the encampments. Some of the camps boasted bath houses and other luxuries. When the legion was on the march the old-fashioned temporary camps came into use once more but all the soldiers dreamed of and longed for the warmth and comfort of their permanent headquarters.

This then was the military machine that gave the Roman Empire its strength and power. Small wonder that the Jews—and any other enemy, come to that—looked on the Roman army as an almost unbreakable force. The Roman army was a powerful war machine that trampled ruthlessly over lesser armies and nations. The Jewish forces

in Judea were always more suited to lightweight skirmishing, hit-and-run tactics that could be hugely effective in the short term but which were simply ground down as the Roman machine powered on. They were not bad soldiers, the Jews, but the concept of a standing army was alien to them.

Jewish victories like the one achieved at the battle of Beth Horon in 66 CE where 6,000 legionaries and auxiliaries were cut down and massacred were rare. Beth Horon was a battle that was fought in closed terrain and the key to Jewish success lay in the ambush they had managed to lay; that and the ineptitude of the Roman general. Beth Horon was an unusual and unexpected occurrence and once they had regrouped and been reinforced, the legions were back. When they returned their vengeance was terrible.

The Roman Empire was undoubtedly a cruel and repressive regime with little or no give and take. The Roman way was the right way. There was no discussion, no debate: you either accepted Rome and all she stood for or you suffered the consequences. When the Romans encountered a people with traditions and a way of life very different from their own it was inevitable that they would clash. They did absorb some ideas and concepts from the defeated nations but these notions quickly became 'Roman notions' and little acknowledgement was ever given to their true origins.

However, conversely, many people from the conquered territories saw and quickly accepted the benefits of the Roman Empire. It was the inevitable result of any conquest and was something the Romans realized and actively encouraged. Better living conditions, the opportunity for safe travel and even more money in your pocket were attractive incentives for people whose previous lives had been basic. Fine clothes and fine food were an attractive lure with which to catch ambitious men and women, particularly when they might otherwise be using their energy and skill to oppose the Roman occupation.

Many simply submitted and adopted the Roman way of life as soon as they were able—men like the Romano-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus whose work is so crucial to any understanding of Masada. Josephus, like many from Judea, never forgot his Jewishness but was intelligent enough to see the value of the Roman way. Others, like the Sicarii and the Zealots who fought to the last on the hilltop fortress of Masada, may have appreciated the Roman force and power but they would do their utmost to keep the enemy at bay. They were proud owners of their own culture and while they might not have had the skill or the strength of the Romans, they had belief in themselves. And that made a showdown inevitable.

* Peter Connolly, *The Roman Army*, p. 17.

† Ibid, pp. 20, 21.

3. THE GREAT REVOLT

The siege of Masada was the final event in the first Romano-Jewish War, the Great Revolt as it is often known. Lasting from 66 until 73 CE, the revolt was a bloody and violent confrontation between two peoples both hellbent on imposing their will in the cruellest and most appallingly brutal fashion. It left thousands dead, temples and cities in ruins and, it can be fairly claimed, was a conflict that changed the course of history in the modern world.

The first Jewish War against the Roman Empire was followed by another, the Bar Kolehba Revolt, which lasted for four years from 132 to 136 CE. There was a third, the Kitos War but this was, in the main, an ethno-religious conflict within Judea.

The three wars were disastrous for the Jews of the Eastern Mediterranean. Fighting against a superior power with seemingly endless numbers of reinforcements, the wars turned a significant and united people into a scattered and persecuted minority. The ramifications of such an event can be felt and experienced even today. And at the end of all the conflict, when the killing was finally over, very little had changed. Roman Judea remained under Roman control and in 136 CE was merged into the province of Syria Palaestina. At the same time all Jews were abruptly and cruelly expelled from the province.

Perhaps more significantly Jerusalem and the great Second Temple—the central worship site of the Jewish faith, built to last a thousand years—were destroyed. The new temple had been built to replace the original structure which had been burned by Nebuchadnezzar during the Jewish-Babylonian War. Now the Second Temple had also gone and a mighty schism opened up between Judaism and Christianity.

Quite how such a tragedy came to pass is crucial to a proper understanding of the problems and the people of the Middle East. The massacre that took place in the mountain fortress of Masada in the year 73 CE can only really be appreciated within the context of Roman empire-building and the Jewish response to what was perceived as a despotic and dictatorial regime. That makes some study of the wars and the Roman occupation crucially important.

Roman interest in Judea—the name was a Greek and Roman adaptation of the correct term Judah—can be dated to the last century BCE. The driving force behind Roman involvement was Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, better known as Pompey the Great. He was the most significant, the most capable general in the last days of the Roman Republic and a bitter rival to Julius Caesar.

Pompey's aim in annexing Judea was simple but it was a strategic necessity. He had no particular interest in the country or its people but he did wish to create a physical buffer around the southern border of the newly established province of Syria.

It was an understandable desire. Judea had been an independent state since the Maccabean Revolt of 163 CBE. However, it was a disunited and troublesome region where banditry and outlaw gangs were rife. Policing the territory was a major problem for Rome as it held inherent dangers for a new province like Syria.

The city of Jerusalem was a hot bed of Jewish nationalism where power grabs and deviancy were commonplace. With the potential for Jewish incursion and interference into other regions it was fairly obvious that sooner or later Roman political antennae would start to twitch.

Syria was annexed in 63 BCE during Pompey's eastern campaigns but even after the defeat of the Armenian leader King Tigranes, the Roman hold on the country remained tenuous. The new province needed support and protection. It did not need banditry or guerrilla raids from places like Judea.

The whole of this part of the Middle East was in a state of almost permanent turmoil and Pompey somewhat reluctantly agreed to lead an expedition into Judea. He may have been reluctant but he realized that Judea was always likely to be a potential enemy and threat to Syria. His invasion was no more than an attempt to calm the situation.

After much campaigning and marching across and around the country, Pompey eventually reached Jerusalem. He laid siege to the city and then the Temple, seemingly invincible behind its huge walls, and finally broke into the sacred enclave through the use of a siege ramp and battering rams. According to some sources as many as 12,000 Jews died at the hands of the legionaries in what became an orgy of blood and violence once the Temple walls were breached.* After that Pompey withdrew and Judea became a satellite of Syria.

In the period immediately before the creation of the empire and, indeed, in the early days of the empire itself, Roman territorial expansion was rapid and venal. Each territory that was conquered by the legions offered exciting possibilities for new economic

development. Trade was central to the conquests but there were many fringe benefits, cultural and scientific advances that combined to make the Roman Empire the greatest, most influential power base the world had ever seen.



An 1899 Maccoun map of Roman Palestine, 65–48 BCE. (British Library)

As a result of the desire to support and defend Syria, Judea became

what was known as a Roman client state, ruled by a series of client or puppet kings such as Herod the Great. It was an arrangement that lasted for fifty years until shortly after Herod's death in approximately 4 BCE (the exact date of his death remains unknown).

Prior to his death Herod had divided Judea into a number of provinces to be ruled by his sons and daughter. Herod had been a tyrannical and unpopular monarch but it was soon obvious that his successors—Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas, Philip the Tetrarch and Salome—were considerably more tyrannical and inefficient than he had ever been.



Herod the Great, ruler of the region for many years, but only at the behest and approval of the Roman Empire.

Herod Archelaus, the eldest of his sons, was terrifyingly bad as a ruler, so much so that the local populace actually appealed to Rome to step in and take direct control. Very quickly, Rome agreed. Herod Archelaus was removed and Judea was annexed as a Roman province, thus confirming what many people already believed: that once Rome

got a toehold in a country it would not be long before the whole region was swallowed up by the avaricious empire.

Looking at the historical boundaries of Judea it is easy to convince yourself that Rome's new province equated to present-day Israel. Not so. It covered just a portion of the modern country, extending east and south from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea. The terrain comprised mainly desert and mountains but, even so, the empire was happy to exploit the region, particularly for items like exotic fruits, corn and vegetables whenever it felt the need.

The Great Revolt broke out in 66 CE. However, trouble had been brewing for years and was inevitably linked with the growth of the Zealots and the Sicarii, two small but hugely influential political groups living and working within Judea in the years leading up to the revolt.

Formed as a group in 6 CE, the Zealots had one main agenda: they were determined to overthrow the Roman government of Judea. It was something of a self-destructive idea as Roman overlordship had, until then, been relatively benign. The activities of the Zealots went some way to changing that for ever.

The three main Jewish groups or factions at that time, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes, were the respectable face of Judaism, while the Zealots, an influential additional group, were decidedly on the outer fringes of Jewish social life. The Roman historian Flavius Josephus called them the Fourth Philosophy.



A rather fanciful image of a Sicarius; in reality they were far more covert.

Contrary to much modern opinion and thought the Zealots were not all violent killers. They were extremists, certainly, men who would brook no denial of their beliefs. They were considered, as someone later said of Lord Byron, “mad, bad and dangerous to know”.

The Zealots agreed with the principles of the Pharisees but with one dramatic difference: they were driven by an insatiable desire for freedom and liberty. And to achieve those they would go to almost any lengths. Founded by Judas of Galilee and Zadok the Pharisee, the Zealots were forceful and aggressive, their very name meaning zealous follower. Although sometimes called the world’s first terrorist group, the appellation is misleading.



A model of the Temple at Jerusalem.

They were dynamic and were not willing to compromise with others who held opposite views but they did not always resort to murder and mayhem at the first opportunity. Jesus of Nazareth chose

Simon the Zealot to be one of his disciples, not because he was warlike but because of his ability as a speaker and agitator. He also chose Matthew, a tax collector who as an employee of the Roman government was a natural enemy of the Zealots. At the very least such a combination of followers would have led to interesting conversations and debates.

In the Talmud the Zealots are referred to as a non-religious group and are called 'Biryonim', the meaning of which is boorish ruffian or wild being. That they certainly were and it is possible that Paul the Apostle may have been a Zealot—something that could have been behind his intense, almost demonic persecution of Christians prior to his conversion.

Despite being relatively few in number, the Zealots were a powerful and influential group. The Sicarii, however, were something else entirely. A splinter group of the Zealots, the Sicarii were numerically small but radical and extreme both in their views and in their actions. If the old adage is true, that terrorism is the unlawful use of violence to obtain political gains, then the Sicarii were the perfect manifestation of a terrorist organization. Their activities certainly prove that terrorism—or at least the use of terror—while often linked to religious groups is not a modern phenomenon.

Violence was their tool and they were renowned throughout Judea as an assassination clique, on a par with the later ninjas of Japan. They viewed the high priests of the Jewish faith as collaborators with the Romans and felt that it was more than acceptable to remove them in any way possible—something that invariably meant murder. Any Jew who submitted to the Romans, who advocated surrender or argued against freedom was, they believed, a coward and was therefore just as liable as the priests to meet a swift and unpleasant end.*

The Sicarii technique of murder or assassination was to slide up to people in broad daylight, usually in public areas such as the market place or in the Temple, and stab their unsuspecting victims in the back or side. For this they used their traditional sicas—short, lethal daggers—concealed inside their clothing, sometimes wrapped up in a long scarf. The Sicarii even joined in with the howls of protest or shock as the targeted victim toppled and fell. When the time was right they would then slip away in the ensuing chaos.

Understandably, their activities caused major panic in crowded cities like Jerusalem where the Sicarii quickly became the dark demons of everyone's nightmares. It does not require too much imagination to conjure an image of some desperate mother urging her

children to behave or else the Sicarii might make a visit. It is, at least, entirely plausible.

Judas Iscariot, the man who would ultimately betray Jesus Christ, was probably a Sicarii. He believed in the words of Jesus but interpreted them in a markedly different fashion from everyone else. Judas was looking for a violent confrontation between the followers of his prophet and the Romans and when he did not get it he became disillusioned and bitter. You do not have to look much further to unearth the motivation for Judas's betrayal of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Sicarii were political animals—but only to a point. Yes, they wanted Judea to be free from Roman influence and used terror tactics to help achieve this. But they were also crooks and bandits who were as often involved in disputes with their fellow Jews as they were with the Romans. As if to prove the point the Sicarii often took bribes to spare potential victims, a practice more in keeping with criminals than terrorists.

This Jewish mafia clan came to prominence at the same time as the Zealots. Their first leader was Hezekiah, a bandit chief who was something of a Robin Hood figure in that he happily stole from the rich. He did not, however, pass on his takings to the poor. When he was captured and executed, on the cross just like other petty criminals, leadership of the Sicarii passed to his son Judas of Galilee.

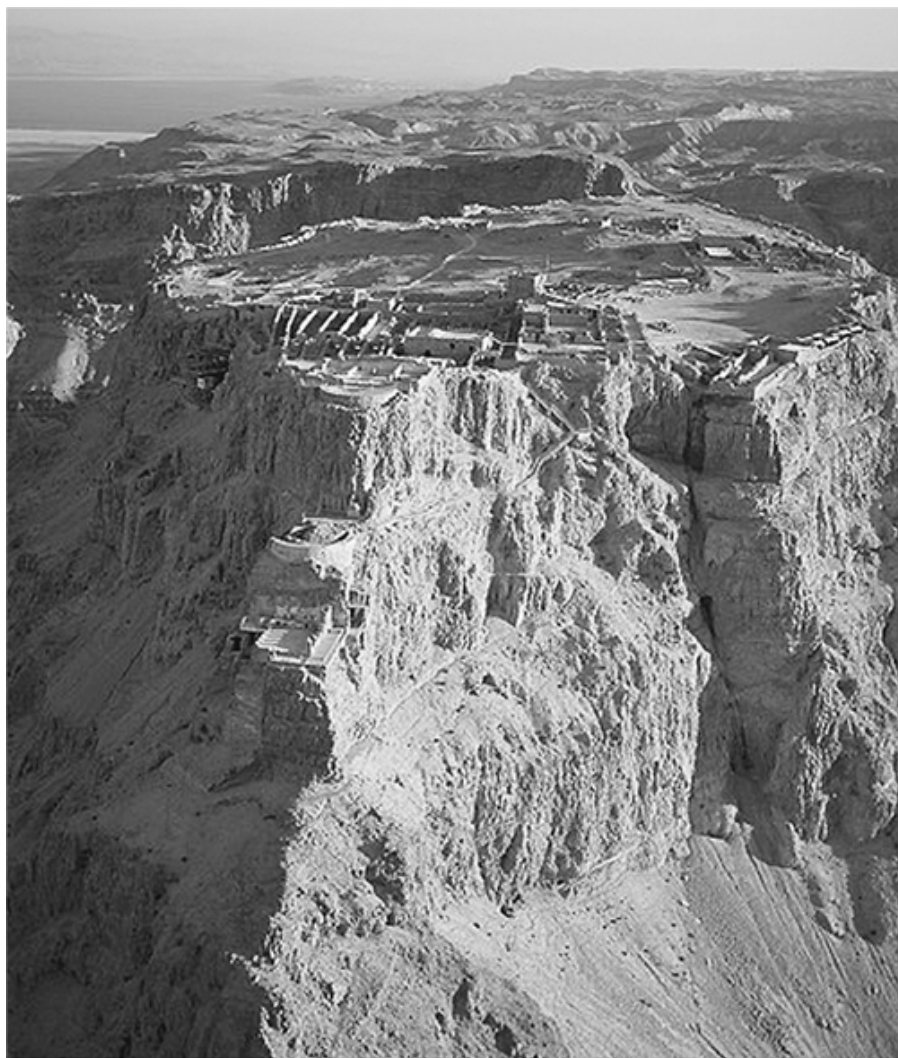
*

It was with Judas of Galilee that the simmering tensions within Judea finally erupted. In 66 CE Judas led his followers in a series of anti-taxation riots which probably cloaked the real Sicarii aim of stealing money and goods from their fellow Jews. There is also a school of thought that says the Temple was defiled when some unknown person spilled a chamber pot outside its walls and main entrance. The blame, of course, was laid at the door of the Romans.

Regardless of the motives the sporadic outbursts of violence grew steadily worse and assaults on Roman citizens increased, something that the Roman rulers did not take lightly. Their pride was hurt and any disrespect shown to individual Romans meant an insult to the empire and the standing of the men involved.

The governor of Judea, Gessius Florus, was hardly the most efficient procurator Judea had ever had. He was also incredibly corrupt. He responded to the Sicarii-induced riots with an attack on the most obvious but also most dangerous of targets, the Temple. His soldiers plundered and destroyed religious artefacts, Florus claiming

that all of the money, silver and valuables he took were to be passed on to the emperor. The claim fooled nobody. Then Gessius Florus followed up this violation by arresting senior Jewish figures in the city.



The sheer size of the palace and fortress of Masada can be glimpsed in this aerial view.

The effect of his attack triggered a wide-scale rebellion and within weeks the country was out of control. Jerusalem descended into virtual anarchy. Florus appealed for help and Cestius Gallus, legate of Syria, responded by preparing to march into Judea with the XII Legion. He was contemptuous of the Jewish opposition and was clear

that he was coming to quell the revolt.

By now, however, the Jewish patriots had organized themselves. A Judean free government was established in Jerusalem, consisting of Joseph ben Gurion, Ananas ben Ananas (the former High Priest) and Joshua ben Gemia while Yosef ben Matityahu was appointed rebel commander in Galilee. At a time when prophecies about the end of Roman rule were rampant, it was a difficult and dangerous moment in Judean history. There had always been prophecies about the demise of the Roman overlords but this time it was different, this time people believed them.

Meanwhile leadership of the Sicarii was also undergoing a change. Judas of Galilee was captured by the Romans and executed, leaving his sons Jacob and Simon to take over the reins. It was during their period in power that the slogan 'No Lord but God' was first used. How genuine the brothers were remains doubtful but Judea was awash with messianic prophecies and their message went down well with the people.

Then, perhaps inevitably, Jacob and Simon were captured and crucified. Leadership of the Sicarii fell to Menahem ben Yehuda, the grandson of Judas of Galilee. He was a more formidable figure than most recent leaders and for a brief period the Sicarii ran rampant through Jerusalem. Nobody was safe from the Sicarii violence. Even Jonathan, the High Priest was 'executed' by the Sicarii, stabbed as he made his way to the Temple. It was the most significant public murder yet carried out by the crime family and gave some indication that Menahem had ambitions other than purely monetary ones.

Perhaps realizing the tenuous nature of their position, Menahem soon took his people out of Jerusalem into the country where they became, effectively, a large and dangerous band of brigands. So dangerous were they that local landowners were forced to raise and equip their own private armies in order to defend their property.

It was virtually civil war and this at a time when the greatest threat of all—the Roman army of Cestius Gallus—was marching ever closer. In the words of Romano-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus it was a time when "All Judea was filled with the effects of their madness."^{*}

Menahem had designs on the position of Messiah King in the Temple, a role that would have given him total control of the rebellion but this, understandably enough, was immediately opposed by almost everyone. Yet again violence reigned in the country, Zealots from the north fighting with militiamen who had been invited in by the Sadducee leaders.

When Menahem's plan failed the Sicarii, faced by superior

numbers, fled south. They found refuge on the massive and seemingly insurmountable hilltop fortress of Masada overlooking the Dead Sea. There was a small Roman garrison based in the fortress but this was quickly overcome. According to some sources the garrison numbered 700 men but a force of that size seems unlikely. The Sicarii had nowhere close to that number and were certainly not equipped to fight a pitched battle against the most powerful soldiers in the world.

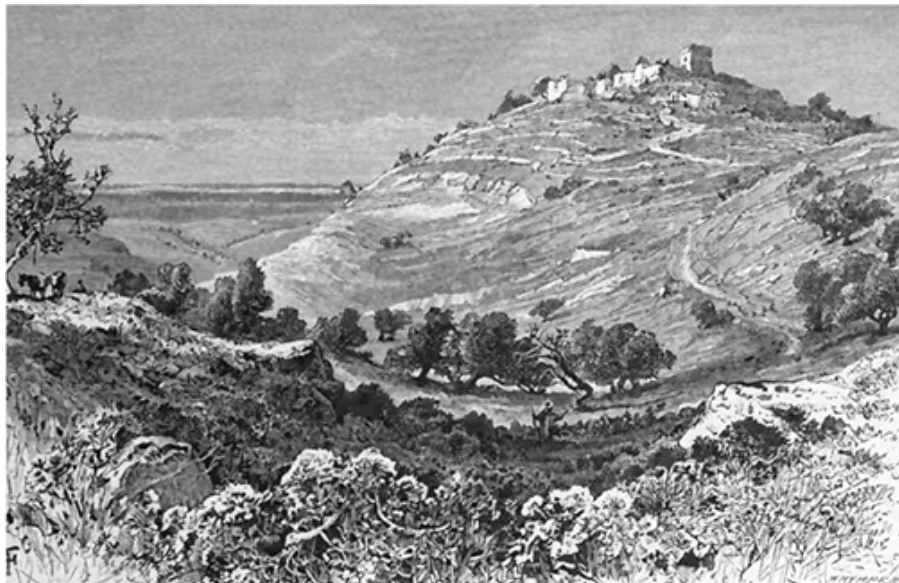
A swift assault at night against a token garrison, with the Sicarii wielding their famous curved daggers, seems a more probable course of action. According to the historian and writer Flavius Josephus this is exactly what happened on Masada although he offers no specific detail about numbers or tactics: "They took it [Masada] by treachery, and slew the Romans that were there, and put others of their own party to keep it."*

However it happened, by late 66 or early 67 CE the Sicarii had been driven from Jerusalem and arrived at Masada. And there, apart from one brief incursion that was to prove fatal for Menahem, they sat out the rest of the Great Revolt.

Intensely ambitious, Menahem was not entirely finished with Jewish politics. High up on the summit of Masada he discovered the remains of King Herod's armoury and decided on one more try for ultimate power before the Romans arrived in force. He armed his followers and marched on Jerusalem, assassinating High Priest Ananias and seizing control of the city.

Menahem did not enjoy his victory for long. He was captured by Eleazar ben Ananias, a relative of High Priest Jonathan whom Menahem had murdered in 57 CE. It is hard to resist the idea that this was a revenge killing as Menahem's death was far from a routine execution. The Sicarii leader was first tortured and then executed. Once again the Sicarii fled back to Masada, command of the dwindling band passing now to Menahem's nephew Eleazar ben Ya'ir.

Meanwhile the avenging Romans from Syria were marching deeper and deeper into Judea. Gallus had under his command 30,000 men, including legionary soldiers and levies from Rome's allies in the region. It was a formidable number of troops and at the outset Gallus seemed to be in total control of the situation.



The village of Beth Horon where the Roman legions met disaster.

He arrived outside the walls of Jerusalem and immediately put the city under siege. Things seemed to be going well but then, for some obscure reason, he decided to break off the siege and withdraw his forces down the Beth Horon Pass towards the coastal plain. It was a terrible mistake, one that was to prove fatal for so many of Gallus's soldiers.

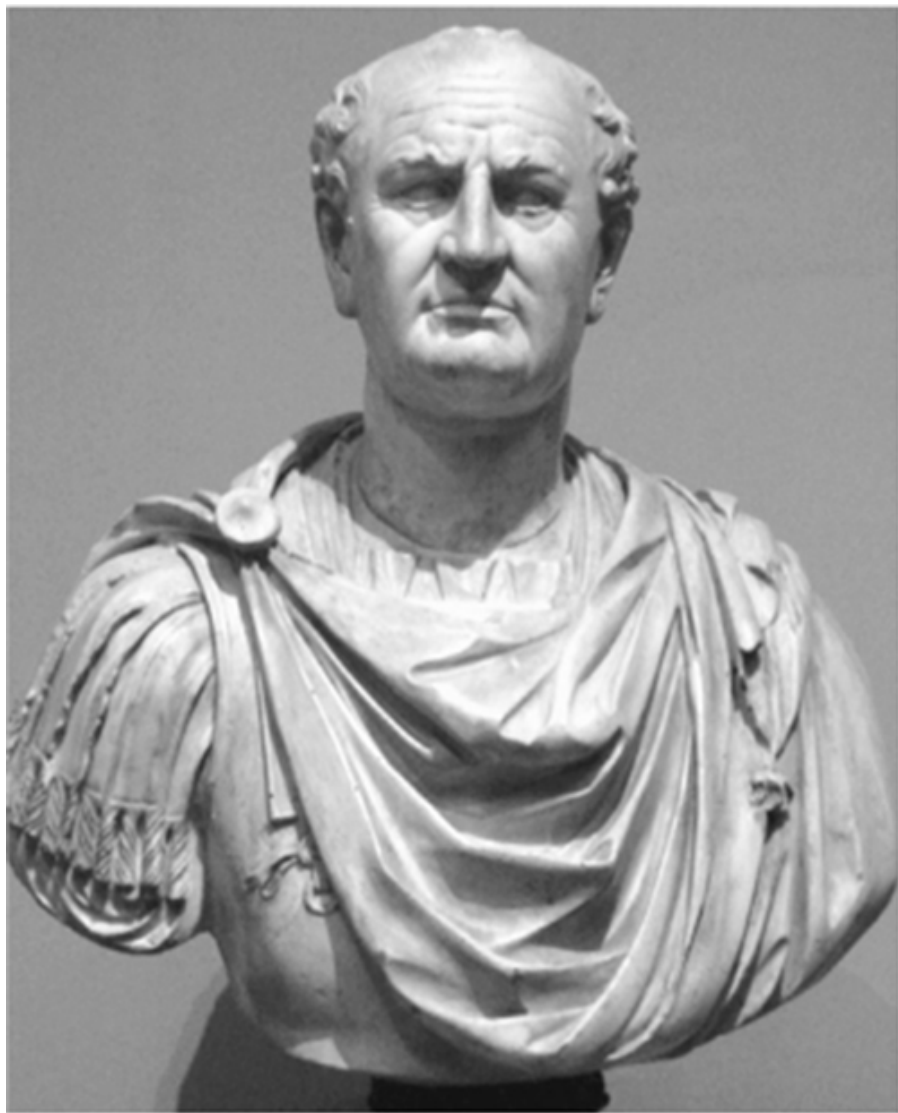
Within weeks Gallus was ambushed and nearly 6,000 of his troops massacred by the Jews. The Zealots were at the forefront of the battle which quickly became a swift and brutal running fight. Outmatched, outmanoeuvred and outfought, the troops—legionaries and auxiliaries alike—were sitting targets. The battle also saw the XII Legion lose its sacred eagle, a terrible disaster and disgrace for any Roman military unit. The punishment for such a disaster was decimation, one man in every ten being taken out and executed. Decimation was the least of their worries: there were not that many of the XIIth who survived the battle.

The Sicarii, bandits rather than soldiers, took no part in any of the action and it is doubtful if many or any of them were even present. In the wake of his defeat Gallus, ever conscious of his own safety, promptly abandoned the remains of his army and fled to Antioch.

The Emperor Nero, normally decadent and listless, reacted swiftly and somewhat out of character. Titus Flavius Sabinus Vespasianus, later to be crowned Emperor Vespasian, was sent to Judea, arriving in Ptolemais (now Acre) with the X and V legions before the end of the

year. He was soon joined by his son Titus who brought with him the XV Legion from Alexandria. When local troops supplied by allies like Herod Agrippa II were added to Vespasian's force it gave him a vast army of 60,000 men, considerably more than the ill-fated force of Cestius Gallus.

Realizing the strength of Jerusalem, Vespasian decided, first, to eradicate rebel strongholds wherever they were situated and to punish what he considered to be the supporting silent population. For the moment Jerusalem could wait. Its turn would come later.



Emperor Vespasian.

Vespasian quickly marched into Galilee, overrunning Jotapata (also known as Yodfat) and subduing Tarichaea. Within six months of his arrival, he was in Caesarea, ready now to mount an assault on Jerusalem. And then, with the situation in Rome descending into civil war after the suicide of Emperor Nero, Vespasian felt compelled to return to the empire's capital, not only to restore order but also to seize his own chance of ultimate power.

Known as the Year of the Four Emperors, it was a difficult and chaotic period in Roman history but it ended in the summer of 69 CE when, on 1 July, Vespasian was proclaimed Emperor by the legions of Roman Egypt and Judea and duly installed on the imperial throne.

When he left Judea Vespasian had passed on command of the Judean army to his son Titus. The young man was clear about what he must do if he was going to finish the campaign and suppress the revolt. He immediately marched on Jerusalem, driving the civilian population of the country before him. The terrified civilians fled into the city for protection, increasing the population of Jerusalem to a totally unmanageable one million people.



Coins minted during the Great Revolt.

Early in 70 CE Titus opened the siege of Jerusalem. It was a massive undertaking as the city was not only well supplied with troops, its fortifications were a significant challenge: "The city of Jerusalem was fortified with three walls, on such parts as were not encompassed with unpassable valleys ... in such parts it had but one wall."^{*}

The first two walls were breached within three weeks but a stubborn and heroic stand by the rebels in the city stopped Titus in his tracks and he was unable to penetrate the third wall. The siege that

followed lasted for seven months. Within the city there was savage infighting between the Zealots and almost everyone else and at one stage much of the valuable food supply was burned. The city finally fell in the summer of 70 CE. What followed was carnage. The magnificent Second Temple was destroyed, burned to the ground, civilians were murdered and blood ran freely in the streets. The Sadducee sect fell into obscurity and dozens of Zealots who had escaped the massacre promptly headed south to find refuge with the Sicarii on Masada.

One Sadducee sage, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, managed to escape the slaughter, his students smuggling him out of the city in a coffin. He went on to establish a Judaic school at Yavne which became a major centre for Talmudic study. This allowed the Jewish people to continue their culture and their religion, albeit without the Temple.

In the wake of the disaster many ordinary Jews, just like the Zealots, fled the area. Some went south to Masada where Eleazar ben Ya'ir welcomed them in. Soon the hilltop fortress had become a refuge for anyone fleeing Roman influence and power. It was a sanctuary that not all of the Jewish refugees managed to reach, many of them being apprehended when they were barely out of Jerusalem and sold into captivity as slaves.



The Old Temple of Jerusalem, as seen in 1941. (Dvr Tom Beazley)

Titus, like his father Vespasian, did not stay much longer in Judea. Despite falling in love with a Jewish woman—the potential match was prohibited by his father—Titus had no affection for the country. Like

many Romans he found the climate and the environment unappealing and he left Judea in 71 CE, soon after the fall of Jerusalem. Lucilius Bassus was appointed to the governorship with the specific task of mopping up the remains of the Jewish Revolt.

*

With the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple the Great Revolt was, to all intents and purposes, over. Apart from a few isolated garrisons that were still holding out, the danger had passed. That was certainly what Titus believed, otherwise it is hard to know what he was thinking about when he abandoned his legions and took ship back to Rome.

Yet Titus—and so many others—had forgotten one small factor: the Sicarii base on Masada. Situated in southern Judea on the shore of the Dead Sea, this mountain fortress of the Sicarii now became the unlikely centre of Jewish opposition to the Roman army. There were other Jewish garrisons in places like Herodium but the high and lofty peak of Masada was potentially the most dangerous opposition to Roman rule.

The Sicarii offered sanctuary to all those who wanted it—men, women, children, Zealots and Sadducees alike—but at heart they remained a warlike group of bandits and gangsters. Despite popular perception—probably fostered by themselves—they had never been part of the freedom-seeking liberation movement; that was the role and task of the main Zealot party.



In 1868 Edward Poynter produced another of his celebrated Roman spectacles, *The Catapult*. This shows Roman soldiers manning a siege engine for an attack on the walls of Carthage, during the siege which ended in the destruction of Carthage in 146 BC. (Laing Art Gallery)



François Joseph Heim's 1824 *Study for Destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans*.

Yet these were the men who now found themselves saddled with the unwanted tag of Judea's last freedom fighters. Many of those in the hilltop fortress were unaware of the cross they had been given to bear. But Eleazar knew, just like he knew that the Roman Empire would not suffer the situation for ever. At some stage there would have to be a reckoning.

The Great Revolt had seen close on 200,000 Jews become fatalities while the Romans had suffered at least 20,000 casualties themselves. The damage caused to the country's economy and infrastructure was vast. The revolt had been costly for everyone and people like Titus (and his successors in the governorship) and Eleazar ben Ya'ir could be excused for thinking that with the war over it was time to settle down to a peaceful and productive peace. For Rome that meant trade and economic growth. For Eleazar and his Sicarii bandits it was a return to the old ways of banditry and thieving. It was not to be.



The Siege and Destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans Under the Command of Titus, A.D. 70, an 1850 painting by David Roberts. (www.preteristarchive.com)

While they did not particularly want it, the men up on the heights of Masada soon found themselves at the centre of the final act in the rebellion. And like all members of their sect, while they did not look for hero status, when they were confronted by a problem like the Romans they were never going to simply walk away. They would fight.

To begin with the Roman officials in Judea, even the emperor back in Rome, did not consider the Sicarii and the fortress of Masada anything more than a minor distraction. There were, quite simply, bigger fish to fry.

Routine patrols past the foot of the mountain, Lucilius Bassus decided, would be enough to keep the Sicarii in their place. They would see the legions and know that the firm fist of Roman law was close at hand. It was policing from a distance and as long as the residents of Masada did not cause too many difficulties, the Romans were content to live and let live. The Sicarii were nothing more than bandits, Bassus felt. They might raid local villages occasionally but they did not have the manpower, the weapons or the willingness to offer a major challenge to Rome—so let them sit there in splendid isolation; they were not hurting anyone who mattered. Masada could be a prison as well as a fortress.



A Bedouin woman in Jerusalem, c. 1900, for countless centuries a place where cultures merged ... and clashed. (Matson coll. / LoC)

And then things changed. Vespasian, the new emperor, had needed time to take stock of the situation and when he finally found the space to look at the problems of the empire he soon realized that things could not go on as they were. The recent Jewish Revolt, combined with the rebellion of the Batavarians in the Rhineland, had seriously undermined Roman prestige. The empire had only just emerged from a damaging civil war and Vespasian, so recently installed as emperor, had no desire to witness further challenges to his position.

A victory was required in order to boost national pride and prevent further problems. The Sicarii up on their mountain fortress were, it

was believed, an easy target. Far from being allowed to lead a peaceful and untroubled existence where they were free to pursue their bandit ways, the Sicarii suddenly found themselves the target of the next Roman military campaign.

* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pompey>.

* Paul Christian, 'Who Were the Sicarii?' in *Meridian*, June 2004.

* Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Book 2, Chapter 22.

* Ibid, Book 2, Chapter 17.

* Ibid, Book 5, [Chapter 4](#).

4. THE MASADA COMPLEX

Without wishing to pre-empt the full story of Masada it is worth recording and reiterating here—in case there are people who do not know the complete history— that the Sicarii and the Zealots on Masada committed mass suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Romans. That is the basic tale, the one that has been in the public domain for many years; there is, however, a lot more than that to the story of the siege and its tragic ending.

The palace and fortress of Masada have always held a special place in the hearts and minds of the Israeli people. It is a symbol in a country that has always needed symbols and ideals. And yet Masada is also a place of controversy. There are those who regard the fortress and the fate of its defenders as an example of heroic resistance and defiance, many viewing it as a place of quasi-religious significance. But there are others who think of Masada's end as no more than a testament to extremism and a stubborn refusal to compromise.



While in the twentieth century Israel was in the throes of forming itself into a nation, with the country surrounded and beset by enemies who were intent on destroying all that had so recently been created, the Masada story was certainly a legend to cling to. It was a tale of courage and defiance from which it was possible for everyone to take hope and heart.

The adage 'Masada shall not fall again' was not just a line from a poem, it was a mantra that rang across the land, giving people courage and comfort. Like the last defenders of Masada the people of the new Israel would withstand the efforts of their enemies to destroy them; they would courageously resist all efforts to obliterate them from the face of the earth, holding fast to the Sicarii testament that there is 'No Lord but God'.

Yigael Yadin, soldier, politician and archaeologist, summed up the feelings of the Israeli people in his book about the archaeological excavation of Masada that he undertook in the 1960s: "Masada represents for all of us in Israel and for many elsewhere, archaeologists and laymen, a symbol of courage, a monument to our great national figures, heroes who chose death over a life of physical and moral serfdom."^{*}

Even as Israel was taking shape, however, there were dissenters. While approved by many the view of Masada as a symbol was not a universal emotion. As early as 1947 David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of the country, went on record as saying that he disliked the Masada story. In the battle against Egypt and the other Arab states waiting just over the horizon to pounce more would be needed. Ben-Gurion felt that the message should be to fight to the bitter end, not take the easy way out.

Ben-Gurion, like many others, was mistaking support for the heroism of the defenders of Masada for a desire to follow the story of mass suicide. The two do not have to run together but that feeling of David Ben-Gurion's has grown. As Israel has become surer of herself on the world stage—and with the security engendered by successive military victories—there has been less of a backs-to-the-wall attitude by the Israeli people. Put simply, the Masada story has not been needed quite as much.

At the same time, as research and historical opinions have altered or developed there has grown a more measured understanding of the defenders of the hilltop fortress. Now, rather than accepting without question, people feel able to ask the simple but obvious question: Were the Sicarii the last heroic defenders of the Great Revolt or were

they a gang of killers who became the detritus of a Roman mopping-up operation? The debate continues to rage.



The Triumph of Titus by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, oil on canvas, 1885.

Harry S. Truman, president of the United States, had it about right

when he commented that it did not matter what they were discussing: “no two historians ever agree on what happened and they will both think that they are right.” And as far as Masada is concerned this is certainly the case. There are many historians who now doubt the tale of mass suicide, believing that the end, when it came, was a lot more chaotic. Some of the defenders, they believe, did kill themselves but others fought the attacking Romans until they were overpowered and destroyed.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that the only known contemporary account of the events on and around Masada in 73 CE is that of the Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus (Yoseph ben Matatyahu as his name is in Hebrew). Initially a rebel leader in the struggle against Rome, Josephus had been captured at the battle of Jotapata and imprisoned by Vespasian who was then in command of the Judean expedition.

Josephus was about to be sent to Rome, where his fate would have been at best uncertain, when he managed to convince Vespasian that he had been blessed with the gift of prophesy. How he achieved this he does not say but Vespasian was at a crossroads in his life, about to take a great gamble, and was probably looking for reassurance.

More importantly Josephus “foresaw” that Vespasian would soon become emperor and would be succeeded by his son Titus. Vespasian was totally taken in and became the patron of Josephus. It was a lucky break for the would-be prophet. Converted to the Roman way of life, Josephus went on to become a Roman historian of considerable note, leaving us with the only first-hand account of the first Jewish-Roman War.



The historian and former soldier Josephus, on whom we heavily rely for an account of the siege and eventual destruction of the Sicarii garrison on Masada.



Another stylized depiction of Flavius Josephus.

The rabbis made no mention of the siege or of the mass suicide when they wrote the Talmud and the fall of the Masada complex was not recognized as part of Jewish history. Similarly, there is no record of the events left by the Romans who regarded the Great Revolt as finishing with the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

Josephus was not present at the siege or at the eventual fall of

Masada so even his account is a second-hand one, the writer having to rely on the memories of the soldiers who were there—and on his own considerable literary talents. Like most ancient historians or writers, Josephus was renowned for his literary embellishments. The ascription of valiant speeches to the heroes of the past was an accepted literary device with the writers of ancient history and Josephus's book on the Great Revolt— *The Jewish War*—is full of them.

Nevertheless, his account is all that we have. Even writers like Shaye Cohen, highly critical of much that Josephus wrote, has to agree that there are simply no other sources:



Masada. (Matson coll. / LoC)

We do not know what happened on the summit of Masada ...
The archaeological discoveries of Professor Yadin show that

Masada was besieged by the Romans in the fashion described by Josephus but they do not tell us how the defenders of Masada were killed. For this and for all of the other details of Masada's history, we are dependent of Josephus alone.*

That leaves the story of Masada, like so much history, in the hands of interpretation. Informed judgement is the best that we can hope for.

*

Masada, or Metsada in Hebrew, means fortress—it is aptly named. The complex that we know as Masada sits on the western rim of the Judean desert, some sixty miles south of Jerusalem. It is an isolated plateau, a mesa or, as some would have it, a lozenge-shaped table-mountain that stands 1,500 feet above the shore of the Dead Sea. Its length is 1,950 feet and the whole site covers twenty-three acres. It is therefore a significant fortress, particularly in the first and second centuries when weapons were neither so powerful nor as available as they later became. According to Jewish tradition this was where David rested during his flight from King Saul. Fact or fiction, it would have been a sensible place to pause and take stock.

Yigael Yadin, in his excavations at the site during the 1960s, has argued that the first occupants of the hill made their homes in caves on the rock in the Chalcolithic period, about the fourth millennium CBE. They were probably not a settled community but part of a nomadic people that were constantly moving around the Judean desert at that time.

The Hasmonean dynasty that ruled Judea between the years 140 and 37 BCE was the first to build a dwelling on top of this spectacular lump of rock, the earliest buildings being created by King Alexander Janneus. However, King Herod who, with the help of the Romans came to power after the Hasmoneans, was the man who turned it into a royal palace and a citadel. For such a magnificent series of buildings—created in very difficult and exacting surroundings—it was finished in record-breaking time between the years 37 and 31 BCE.

Masada was not an isolated creation as Herod was renowned for several spectacular building projects. These included the expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the creation of the port at Caesarea and building from scratch the fortress palace of Herodium. Masada, though, was undoubtedly the most significant and, architecturally, by far the most impressive of all Herod's many building achievements.



The famous 'hanging palace', an artist's impression of what it would have looked like in the days of King Herod.

Herod's aim at Masada was to create a refuge. Masada was somewhere he could feel safe and protected if his subjects should ever rise against him, a prospect that terrified him and was certainly not beyond the bounds of possibility. It was also part of a defensive structure to protect the kingdom from potential invaders like the Egyptians. For those reasons alone it was Herod who built the main defences of the Masada complex. As Professor Yigael Yadin has written: "It is now definitely established that the Masada of King Herod was basically a citadel bounded by a casement wall."*

How often Herod stayed in his mountain fortress is not known but it is more than likely he spent large portions of each year in the structure that he had created. It is recorded that when Jerusalem was attacked by the Parthians in 40 BCE Herod took his family to Masada for safety. His magnificent palaces were not yet created and consequently Herod soon moved on to Petra on the opposite, or eastern, side of the Dead Sea. He had seen the potential, however, and construction work on the new fortress began just a few years later.

Herod, of course, being Herod was not prepared to create a simple fortress. He was used to luxury and so Masada became a unique combination of royal residence and impregnable citadel. He built a thick casement wall around the edge of the plateau and threw up several tall towers for guards to stare out over the desert. The buildings were made from hard dolomite stone covered with plaster

and decorated with mosaics, wall paintings and tiles. The ceilings of the rooms were high so that the king and his family and followers could stay cool at the height of the Judean summer.

Cleverly, Herod's engineers had dug out a series of cisterns to hold water delivered by aqueducts from two nearby *wadis*. The cisterns, hollowed deep in the rock, were a miracle of engineering with a total capacity of over a million cubic feet of water. Regularly filled by rainfall and flash flooding, there was enough water there to supply the royal residence and fortress for several years.



One of the huge cisterns for gathering water on Masada.

Masada boasted a large bath house and swimming pool as well as vast grain storehouses. But, in particular, there were two stunning royal palaces. The most majestic and opulent of these was the hanging palace, built over three terraces at the northern end of the fortress. Seeming to hang off the edge of the plateau, the palace was effectively below the level of the rest of the fortress. It was an opulent environment with magnificent views over the surrounding country. Created by Herod's architects in classical Roman style, the three levels of the hanging palace were the height of luxury. Yadin describes the palace complex thus: "In its western section stood his large palace with its residential, ceremonial and administrative functions; at its northern edge, just beneath the wall, perched his private palace-villa."^{*}

The two lower levels of the hanging palace were designed purely as areas for relaxation and leisure. They were filled with ornate wall paintings and luxurious furniture. The upper terrace was intended only for accommodation and sleeping quarters. Divided into two sections there were no more than a handful of bedrooms which would pre-suppose that this area was reserved for Herod alone, and perhaps whichever one of his nine wives was in favour.†

Being built on the highest point of the mountaintop, the hanging palace was also a fortress within a fortress. Had the walls of the citadel ever been breached the defenders would have simply retired to this part of the fortress to make a last stand; that, at least, was the theory.

In addition to the two royal dwellings the complex contained several smaller palaces or villas for court officials, family members and visitors. All in all, Masada was an impressive, luxurious hilltop abode with the added bonus of being a significant fortress which, if not actually impregnable, was perilously close.

The main route into the complex was by a winding road or track that curled around the eastern flank of the mountain, taking the visitor or would-be entrant across and across in traditional hill-walking style rather than directly upwards. It was known as the Snake Path—for obvious reasons—and left any visitor breathless and gasping. It could be climbed only in single file, something that gave potential attackers little chance of success and would actually make them more vulnerable than if they remained at the bottom of the rock.

It was possible to scale the cliffs and, indeed, the Sicarii later made several hidden paths up the northern and eastern flanks. But no attacking enemy would ever dream of making such a climb when they would be exposed to fire from the defenders.



The Snake Path, main entrance to the fortress, can be clearly seen in this view of the rock.

Life on Masada may have been luxurious but it was never easy. Even now the heat can be stifling, despite the height of the rock. The prevailing wind blows from a southerly or southwesterly direction but due to the size and location of the nearby mountains it is always liable to sudden change. When that happens winds veer about to blast in from the north, with gale-force winds not an unusual phenomenon, and with gusts of 50 or 60 mph being commonplace.

Thunderstorms must also have been a constant problem for the residents of Masada. While flash flooding would undoubtedly have helped fill the palace reservoirs and cisterns, it could also cause major problems. Yigael Yadin wrote how, during his excavations: “Torrential rains which burst from the skies without warning filled the ravines in a flash, and even the wadi between our dining hall and the volunteers’ tents became a river.”*



Roman infantry, a reenactment. (David Friel)

Flash flooding was a freak of nature with which the residents of Masada soon learned to cope. They knew the rains would return again and again. The floods would wash away banks, fill gullies that had previously been traversable and destroy crops with ferocious speed.

As recently as April 2018 flash flooding washed away the road running from Qumran to Masada, obliterating the road and killing thirteen people in the process. That was the effect of flash flooding on modern, well-designed roads; in Herod's or the Sicarii's time the consequences of such meteorological misfortunes would have been a hundred times worse.

The soil on top of Masada remains exceptionally fertile. Josephus called it "fat soil", better for agriculture than anything found in the adjacent valleys. And here Herod's gardeners grew crops such as vegetables, dates, olives and corn. They raised cattle and goats and Herod even built up a stock of fine wine, importing it from vineyards in southern Italy. Despite the attentions of thirsty Roman legionaries, some of the wine still survived when the Sicarii took up residence many years later.



Flash flooding in the modern Negev.



Masada was a luxurious palace; this shows one of the hot rooms for the baths.

The death of Herod the Great brought sudden change for the people of Judea. In particular the presence of the Roman army, auxiliaries, legionaries and support troops alike, was immediately more noticeable—hardly surprising when the Jewish people of the region were the very ones who had asked the empire to intervene and take over from Herod Archelaus. And despite its isolated location, Masada was no different from any other part of Judea.

The hilltop fortress-cum-palace was occupied by Roman soldiers

soon after the empire took control of the country. It was, in all probability, a small garrison; after all, the Jews in this part of the country had invited the Romans to take control and were not a conquered and disaffected people. As a result there was no real expectation of revolt or violence. The outbreak of the Great Revolt proved the judgement of the Romans to be misguided.

When the garrison at Masada was destroyed by the Sicarii during the Great Revolt the buildings, walls and palaces of the complex, despite a fifty-year gap since the death of Herod, were in an excellent state of preservation. The Sicarii, however, had little interest in murals and the luxurious environment of the long-dead king. Even so, they instantly saw the value of such a strong defensive structure and were not slow to adapt the buildings to suit their intentions.



An aspect of the siege ramp, from below.

They built nothing, added no lavish construction to the complex, but the adaptations made to the magnificent rooms that they found were significant, if only in their simplicity. Some of the alterations were deliberately done, others occurred as if by accident. Tiles were smashed and broken to create rubble for use as hard core and the smoke from their cooking fires and ovens soon coated the walls like a thick black undercoat of paint.



A typical mosaic floor, one of only a few remaining at Masada.

The Sicarii also put up partitions in the larger rooms, dividing them into smaller dwelling places to provide the privacy which the dozens of refugees, many of them family groups, needed. For some reason the Sicarii chose to live in the quarters or rooms along the length of the casement wall. By and large they ignored the opulent palaces.

It is possible that they converted one of the buildings into a synagogue, although several sources say that the room had been used for such a purpose at some stage in the past. The remains of the

building are now regarded as the oldest synagogue in Israel.

To the Sicarii, Masada was not a palace but a fortress. As such it was a functional and one-dimensional structure, one that would keep them safe and allow them to continue with their traditional lifestyle. That was important to the Sicarii. While Eleazar ben Ya'ir was happy to offer a warm welcome to the dozens of refugees who flocked to the citadel, anyone who sought refuge on the rock would have to acknowledge that nothing they said, did or thought would ever interfere with the Sicarii way of life.



The Dead Sea at sunrise, as seen from Masada. (Grauesel)

The Sadducees and the rest could have their religious services as often as they liked. The Sicarii would not bother with them but Eleazar and his men would continue their bandit ways. It was an important agreement.

Life on Masada seems to have been conducted in something of a communal fashion. David Kossoff, falling neatly into the ancient tradition of putting speeches into the mouths of heroes, has given the following words to Eleazar: “Everybody will work for the common good. Everybody will live by the Law. There will be rules because there must be, but those rules will be sensible and agreed by all.”*

Eleazar might be the military leader and commander of the Sicarii but otherwise there was no one individual in charge. Everyone was free to pursue his or her own way of life.

For the Sicarii, of course, that lifestyle involved banditry and raiding the villages scattered over this part of the desert. It was in their blood, this outlaw behaviour, and was something that no Sicarii would willingly give up. They had always been happy to use the excuse that the people they were oppressing, killing and murdering at will, were no more than cowardly peasants who had expressed the desire to live in peace with the Romans. That, in turn, made them traitors and potential victims. It was a stance that fooled nobody. Josephus was strong in his condemnation: “Now this was in reality no better than pretence and a cloak for the barbarity which was made use of by them, and to cover their own avarice.”*

Realizing that the Romans in Judea and back home in Italy were otherwise occupied, Eleazar decided it was time to use the situation to his advantage. Soon after their exodus from Jerusalem the Sicarii returned to their usual ways. With relish they began to plunder, drive off cattle and burn the houses of the villagers in the valleys below their rooftop eyrie. It was not as if they really needed the plunder: they grew crops and raised cattle for themselves up on Masada, just like the desert villagers. That was not what the raids were about: it was the thrill of the chase, the anticipation of action that mattered to the Sicarii.

Josephus records one instance, on Passover, shortly after they had encamped on Masada, how the Sicarii attacked the Jewish settlement of Ein Gedi and made off with all of their crops, fruit and livestock. According to Josephus they killed 700 villagers but such a total seems a little exaggerated in this remote desert region.† It is not clear how large the settlement at Ein Gedi actually was at the time but even if the Sicarii killed every single man, woman and child in the village it is unlikely that the numbers would have come anywhere near to such a total. Interestingly, Josephus also gives a figure of 700 casualties sustained by the Romans when the garrison on Masada was taken by the Sicarii during the Great Revolt.

Whatever the true figure, the Sicarii continued with their gangster ways, swooping down from their mountain base to take whatever they wanted. That was something that the Roman Empire could not ignore for long.

Even in a land and at a time when, as Josephus said, “The Jews were divided between sedition and tyranny,”‡ it was obvious that the Sicarii hiatus on Masada was no more than a brief pause. An ending would come and it would come quickly.

* Yigael Yadin, *Masada*, p. 13.

* Shaye Cohen, 'Masada: Literary Tradition' in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 1982, p. 385.

* Yadin, p. 203.

* Ibid, pp. 203-205.

† Ibid, pp. 59, 62.

* Ibid, pp. 29-31.

* David Kossoff, *The Voices of Masada*, p. 176.

* Josephus, Book 4, [Chapter 8](#).

† Ibid, Book 4, [Chapter 7](#).

‡ Ibid.

5. PREPARING FOR THE EVENT

It is unfortunate that we know very little about the character, the appearance and the history of Lucius Silva and Eleazar ben Ya'ir, the two main antagonists involved in the siege of Masada. If they had each written about the siege and assault of Masada we might have been able to glean something about the two men. They said and wrote nothing and consequently remain little more than cyphers in our imaginations.

A lack of comment on the affair from Eleazar and Silva was to be expected; one of them was dead and unable to make any comment on the matter; the other had no inclination to write anything about his actions and had no platform upon which to air his views anyway. It means that we are obliged to rely largely on the work of historian Flavius Josephus. Writing for Rome and for a Roman audience, the work of Josephus is inevitably skewed and not being present at the siege he never met or had any real awareness of Eleazar ben Ya'ir. Although he was personally acquainted with Lucius Silva, the degree of contact between Josephus and the general during the campaign remains unclear.



The Dead Sea as seen from Ein Gedi. (Shirley Saramito Pikiwiki Israel)

The account given by Josephus remains a plot-driven retelling of events. Insights into a person's character are limited and even the famous speeches supposedly given by Eleazar before the mass suicide—which, it might be supposed, would reveal the man's thinking and logic—owe much more to the literary skills of Josephus than to the precise recording of what was really said. Once again, we come down to educated guesses, to interpretation and to individual judgement. Even so, there are still assessments that can be made, informed assessments that are probably not that far from the truth.

Lucius Flavius Silva was a career soldier from a good patrician family who was always intended for high office. He had been educated in the traditional Roman style and served in several regions or commands before becoming a consul and military tribune of the IV Legion in Syria. Not particularly ambitious, he was a pragmatic and practical man who was dutiful to the needs of the empire, even at the expense of his own wishes and desires.

Silva inherited the Masada campaign after the death of Lucilius Bassus who had been appointed Legate of Judea in 71 CE. Ordered to destroy the last outposts of Jewish rebellion, Bassus led out the X Legion to destroy the garrisons at Herodium and Machaerus, intending to march on Masada once the first two fortresses had been taken.



The hilltop fortress of Herodium.

Bassus had gained his appointment from Vespasian after switching his allegiance and supporting him during the Year of the Four Emperors. Being made Legate of Judea was a significant reward but Bassus was very far from being a good general. He was already worn out and had always been more of an organizer than field commander. His most significant post before his Judean appointment had been as prefect of the Roman fleet stationed at Ravenna.

Operating with more courage than strategic skill, Bassus arrived outside Herodium. He was happy to receive the surrender of the garrison, along with that of Machaerus, without having to lay siege to the fortresses or engage in heavy fighting. He did, however, apparently butcher the inhabitants of Herodium after the town capitulated and then prepared to move on to Masada.* Bassus never reached the mountain fortress. He fell ill during the march—which was promptly halted—and at the end of the year he died. His replacement was Lucius Flavius Silva.

Silva had been expecting to go back to Rome but now found that he had to undertake another arduous campaign. He must have been resentful; after all he, Bassus and everyone else would have known that there would be no glory or fame to be earned from simply mopping up the last remnants of the rebellion.

Silva was proved right. There was to be no Triumph for him in Rome when everything was over—no adoring crowds or chariot rides, no slave to whisper in his ear that all glory was transient and would soon pass. The remains of a first-century victory arch have been discovered in Jerusalem but Jerusalem was not Rome and a Triumph in the capital of the empire was what every Roman commander really wanted.

Silva's legions would also have been unhappy, wondering what they had done wrong to be given a task that promised nothing but hard work, dust and flies. They believed that they had been out here in the heat of the Middle East for longer than most soldiers of Rome would even dream about. Nevertheless, like the good soldiers they undoubtedly were, they simply sighed, grumbled a little and prepared to shoulder the burden. Their general responded in exactly the same manner. He shrugged, made his preparations and then he and his legion set off across the Judean desert.

Silva has never really received the praise due to him for his leadership, inventiveness and oversight of the legion during the siege of Masada. The creation and use of siege ramps was not unusual in the Roman army but the one that Lucius Silva created was supreme. Displaying the general's determination and pragmatic approach to

almost any problem, the Masada siege ramp is generally acknowledged to be the high-water mark of Roman siege warfare—and it was achieved under the command of General Silva.*



The spirit of Masada as captured by these Israeli women officers in 1950. (Theodore Brauner / Israeli Government Press Office ID D379-073)

Eleazar ben Ya'ir remains an even more shadowy figure than Lucius Flavius Silva. Josephus praises him for his courage, calling him “a valiant man”. He was certainly brave, charismatic and multi-faceted but he was in no way a saintly opponent to Roman dictatorship, no matter how much posterity has tried to cast him in this role. He was a contradictory character with traits and behaviour patterns that still cause historians to stop and think.

Eleazar was as much a dark and deeply flawed individual as he was a hero. He was essentially, like all of the Sicarii, a criminal. Bravery and moral rectitude do not always go hand in hand and Eleazar, whatever else he might have been, was a Sicarii through and through. As such killing, murder and robbery were commonplace for him. Descended from Judas of Galilee, the man whose opposition to Roman tax laws had, literally, begun the Great Revolt, Eleazar was fiery and determined never to submit to Roman rule. He was a nephew of Menahem, his predecessor as leader of the Sicarii, and was well schooled in the arts of banditry and assassination. Eleazar was inventive and clearly had leadership skills out of the ordinary—

essential talents for any leader of a bandit gang like the Sicarii. According to Josephus he was also an outstanding orator. The speeches attributed to him just prior to the fall of Masada are nothing short of masterful. However, the question remains: Were those the words of Eleazar or of Josephus?



An artist's impression of the main palace on Masada.

It is highly unlikely that the speeches would have been remembered verbatim by the only two women to survive the mass suicide and so it is more than likely that Josephus was using the literary imagination for which he was renowned. There is also a school of thought that states Josephus did not just invent the speeches. For the second one he drew heavily on his own words when he was still a Jewish leader in command of the fortified village of Jotapata in northern Galilee in 67 CE. According to the story Josephus and his companions, with defeat imminent, hid in a cave and, at Josephus's urging, vowed to kill themselves rather than be taken prisoner. The suicides duly began. Josephus and one other were the last men standing when suddenly—and again at Josephus's urging—they decided to renege on the promise and hand themselves in to the Romans. Whether or not there is any truth in that story, it is said that Eleazar's supposed second speech to his followers followed closely to the words and theme of Josephus's original speech to his men at Jotapata. So, an orator of some skill Eleazar may have been but Josephus was probably even better.



The remains of one of Masada's watchtowers. (Daniel Ventura)

Whatever else he was, Eleazar was certainly realistic. He knew that once the first outriders of the Roman legions were spotted crossing the desert floor below Masada, it would only be a matter of time before the Sicarii tasted defeat. He faced that possibility with courage and grace, never once thinking of anything but holding out. Josephus, who condemned the Sicarii for their brutality and murderous ways, recorded him as “a potent man” who knew exactly what he had to do in the face of certain death: “Neither did Eleazar once even think of flying away, nor would he permit any other person to do so.”*

A practical man, Eleazar organized the defences of Masada in the best way he could. And at the end, when the Roman legionaries were about to break into the citadel, he confounded them with his courage and sacrifice.

*

Silva made his preparations carefully but with urgent messages undoubtedly coming daily from Rome he knew that his time was limited. Vespasian wanted to see results and he wanted them quickly. His position as emperor was not so secure that he could afford undue time delays and so Silva must have felt his presence, metaphorically at least, constantly at his shoulder.

The number of men Silva took with him to Masada is unclear, some estimates placing the figure as high as 15,000, others limiting it to just five thousand. What is known is that the bulk of his force was comprised of the X Legion, the Legia X Fretensis as it was known, and

an unknown number of auxiliaries and soldiers from allied nations. They came from various locations, joining up as one command while on the march to Masada. The bulk of them, however, came from the Jerusalem area under Silva's direct jurisdiction.

It is probable that when Silva set out on his march he had under his command over 10,000 men and women, some 5,000 to 6,000 of them fighting men. The camps that Silva created around Masada would certainly have provided enough accommodation for at least 10,000 soldiers and Silva, like all Roman generals, was not going to waste time and energy on creating things that were not needed.



Roman soldiers, one with a horn, in a modern reenactment. (Adsek)

It was not just the auxiliary and legionary soldiers that Silva was commanding. Also included in his command were a large number of Jewish prisoners of war and a smaller number of men who had been enslaved. Their purpose was clear: "It [Masada] was a place of

difficulty for getting plenty of provisions; for it was not only food that was to be brought from a great distance, and this made a great deal of pain to those Jews who were appointed for that purpose, but water was also to be brought to the camp.”*

Transporting food and supplies to an isolated base like Masada was a complicated and difficult process. It was not something that any commander would have relished, a regular and routine exercise that would have taken fighting men out of the front line, perhaps for days at a time. Using slaves and enemy soldiers to bring in the food and water seemed to be a logical decision. As it turned out, however, Silva soon found other, more warlike uses for his Jewish prisoners.

To oppose the Roman army Eleazar ben Ya'ir had 967 people sitting on the top of Masada. Some of these were the Sicarii who had been present on the rock for a considerable time. They were augmented by Zealots and Jewish refugees who had fled the Roman persecution after the fall of Jerusalem. A large number of them, however, were women and children and it is unlikely that Eleazar had more than 500 warriors to help him in his fight.

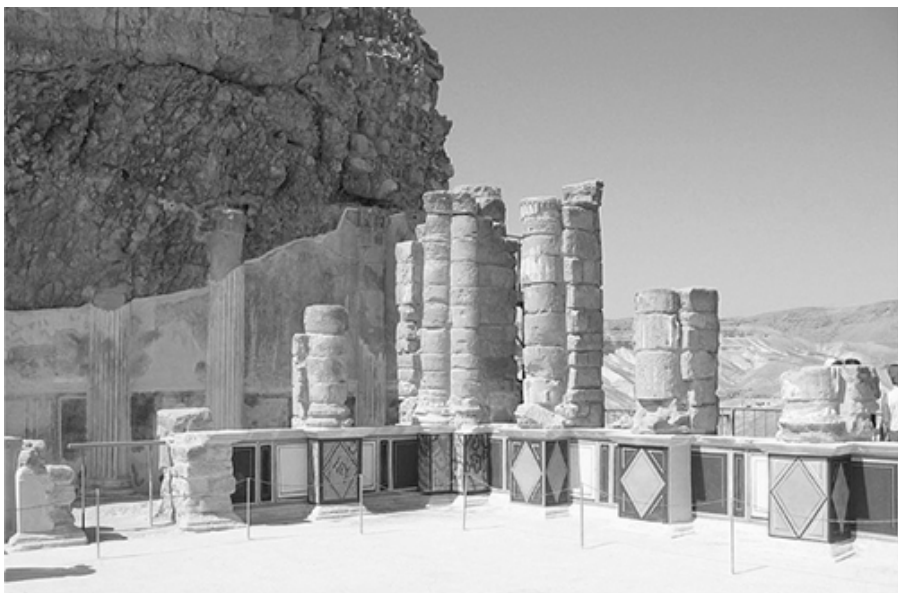
As soon as Herodium and Machaerus fell Eleazar understood and accepted that the Romans were coming. News of the death of Bassus delayed matters but Eleazar knew that this was only a setback and that the Romans would never cancel the operation. There would be a replacement for Bassus and then, inexorable as the seasons, they would come.

Soon scouting parties of Roman horsemen began appearing in the desert. The horsemen sat and watched, made notes and then vanished again. The Sicarii made their final few raids on the local villages and then resigned themselves to what, for them, was little more than imprisonment. It was only a matter of time before the full Roman army appeared before the citadel and Eleazar made what preparations he could.

He knew that his best defence was the mountain itself so he took time to repair the casement wall around the plateau and the watchtowers. Large portions of the beautiful tiled floors were dug up in order to create ammunition to hurl down at the Romans when they came. After that it was just a matter of training people— many of them farmers and traders until a few months ago—in the art of archery and sword fighting.



The Negev Desert. (Tiia Monto)



Roman columns on Masada giving an indication of the beautiful and luxurious nature of Herod's Palace.

Meanwhile General Silva had left his camp and begun the long march to Masada. As with any Roman army on the move, it was an impressive sight, the column stretching out for several miles across the desert sands. The legionaries were heavily encumbered with their shields which were a large but essential part of their armour. Each man also had a light and a heavy javelin, swords, daggers and other

weapons. Many of them carried sledge hammers and everyone had saws, pickaxes, baskets and buckets strapped to their backs. It was at least a two-day march to Masada and they were also laden with sleeping rolls and food for the journey. As ever they wore their helmets and body armour.*

In the heat of the Judean desert the articulated plate armour worn over the chest and back of each soldier must have been excruciatingly hot and uncomfortable. Roman discipline being strict, it is highly unlikely that any of the officers or centurions would have allowed the men to remove their armour or even their helmets. And so they would have tramped steadily onwards, sweating, straining and cursing under their breath.

The order of the march was simple and traditional. Units of auxiliary infantry were sent out ahead to scout and ward off any potential enemy attacks. As always the scouts were followed by the vanguard, the main legion which was in turn supported by flanking units of cavalry. After that came the pioneers and the general himself. He rode with his staff and was accompanied by his senior officers. Cavalry and dismantled siege weapons such as catapults and bolt-throwing ballistae followed at the rear of the column, along with the forces of any allied nations. The prisoners of war made up the rear where the dust of the desert was most debilitating.

A distance of approximately twenty miles a day was expected to be covered but this could be adjusted upwards or downwards depending on climate, terrain and the urgency of the situation.†

Carts and wagons carried tents which, when erected, would become permanent homes for the soldiers. In the main these were pulled by mules which had been requisitioned from the local population. If there were no animals available the only alternative was for the men to bend their backs and pull them, not something any soldier relished.

Towards the end of the second century BCE Marius, the Roman consul in charge of a war in what later became Algeria had become dismayed at the ease with which his baggage trains were being attacked and ransacked by the enemy. In order to counter this he made the legionaries carry most of their supplies on their backs and as a result the soldiers soon christened themselves Marius's Mules.*



Remains of a Roman villa at Avdat, in the Negev. (Zairon)

The idea had not gone away and Marius's Mules continued to carry most of their equipment on their backs, unless they were serving under a more liberal commander like Silva, who, by using large numbers of wagons, was clearly thinking of his men but going against standard military procedure of the time.

There were also the inevitable camp followers, tagging on to the end of the column, men, children and women who earned their living running wine shops and other places of comfort for the soldiers. There were also prostitutes, dancers, showmen and tradesmen of all descriptions who would be welcome in and around the camp, for as long as General Silva was willing to endure them.

*

Eleazar would have seen the clouds of dust kicked up by the Roman column long before he could ever begin to pick out the marching men. Then, inevitably, the soldiers began to take shape on the horizon. Looking at first like long lines of ants, they slowly materialized into cohorts of red-cloaked fighting men, hundreds and hundreds of them, walking with regular, determined strides towards the Sicarii fortress.

There is no record of how the defenders of Masada felt as the Roman army took shape on the plain beneath their citadel. But, if nothing else, the sheer weight of numbers would have appalled them,

particularly the inexperienced and recently trained novices. They had come to Masada for refuge, not to fight, but that was now exactly what would be expected of them. If they were going to cut and run now was the time to do it. Perhaps it was the influence of Eleazar, perhaps it was their own sense of honour, but nobody absconded, nobody left the fortress.

Lucius Silva and his troops arrived at Masada some time at the end of 72 or in the early days of 73 CE. While he had always intended to assault the citadel, his arrival was low key. For the moment he made no move to attack his enemy. This was not what Eleazar had expected. The Sicarii watched the legion arrive at the foot of the hill but were puzzled by the lack of any direct action. Gradually it became clear why there had been no attack.



The circumvallation wall, built by General Silva in the early days of the siege, is still recognizable as a superb feat of engineering.

Silva immediately set his engineers to oversee the work now given to the legionaries. Almost before the defenders realized what was taking place, a circumvallation, or investment, wall, two and a half miles in length, was built around Masada. Made from rough stone blocks with a rubble core, it stood ten feet high and five feet wide, and was completed in exceptionally quick time.

Fifteen guard or observation towers were positioned on the wall, mainly on the eastern and northern sections of the barrier. Either by design or by accident the towers covered the hidden tracks that the defenders had created, quick ways of getting up and down the rocks

on those flanks.

If this positioning of the towers was due to the observations of Silva's scouts then those outriders must have had eagle eyes. They had spent a few hours reconnoitring the area, hardly time to pick out carefully hidden pathways on the flanks of the mountain.*

There are only two alternatives. Either it was sheer luck or Silva was passed information about the tracks from a spy or deserter inside the citadel and placed the towers there to prevent an escape. Such a possibility has never been acknowledged and as there is no evidence of any Romans attempting to use these paths to gain entry to the fortress it is more than likely that the positioning of the towers was sheer accident. Right to the end Silva probably did not know of the paths.

Each of the towers on the circumvallation wall had a number of soldiers posted within it, a guard that was regularly changed to discourage slackness and boredom. Each tower was also equipped with at least one catapult or a stone-throwing ballista.

The circumvallation wall linked six Roman legionary camps which were actually built before the wall's construction. The legionaries were used to creating camps almost at the drop of a hat so this would have given them no major problem and their homes for the next two or three months would have been erected within a few hours.

The camps were positioned at strategic points around the rocky bulk of Masada. In addition, two larger camps were created outside the circling ring of the wall. The aim of the wall and the camps was clear; they were there to stop defenders from escaping.

The Roman camps around Masada were built in the traditional legionary manner. Tents were laid out like the buildings of a town, each of them holding eight men, and preferably standing on the slope of a hill. Inside the tents were stone benches on which the soldiers sat to eat and, later, lay down to sleep. As always there were three main streets and four exits/entrances to each camp. The general had his own tent, in this case in one of the larger camps on the western side of Masada and outside the circumvallation wall. This was also his headquarters, the position carefully chosen so that he could monitor progress on the ramp and the forthcoming assault.



A Roman military camp at Avdat in the Negev Desert. (Zairon)

In this respect Silva's arrangements for his men were totally traditional. Or were they? The difference with Silva's encampments lay in the use of the circumvallation wall as a central part of the offensive structure for his army. The wall gave extra protection for each of the encampments but, more than that, the placement of the soldiers at regular intervals around the circumvallation wall strengthened the barrier between the defenders of Masada and freedom. Once they were in place it was highly unlikely that anyone would be able to escape, even if they had wanted to, from the mountain stronghold.

That suited Silva's strategy quite perfectly. He had no intention of allowing anyone to get past his soldiers; his idea was that every single one of Masada's defenders would die when he unleashed the legions. From these arrangements it was equally clear that Silva never intended to besiege Masada in the way that Titus had besieged Jerusalem. That might well have been the way he would have preferred but even at this early stage he had other plans in mind. He was aware that the Sicarii were some of the most daring and desperate opponents of Roman rule that he had ever encountered. They would be unlikely to capitulate, no matter how desperate the garrison was for food, water and other supplies: "Moreover, he cannot have thought that a siege would have brought them to their knees for he knew that, quite apart from their fighting qualities, they had considerable quantities of water and food on the summit."*

A siege would take an inordinate amount of time, and time was something that Lucius Flavius Silva simply did not have. At some stage he would attack and when that took place everyone knew that there would be precious few survivors.



Siege towers on the circumvallation wall would have looked like this.



On the Masada plateau. (Bgabel)

* Isadore Singer, *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, 1901.

* Ibid.

* Josephus, Book 6, [Chapter 8](#).

* Ibid, Book 7, [Chapter 8](#).

* Kossoff, pp. 101-102.

† Connolly, p. 52.

† Ibid, pp. 26-27.

* www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites.

* Yadin, p. 212.

6. THE RAMP

Nobody knows when the idea of building a siege ramp—or assault embankment as it is sometimes known—first occurred to Lucius Silva. Perhaps he had already decided on his tactics before he arrived at Masada. There would have been little else to do on his long journey across the desert. Possibly he was advised by his engineers or by his scouts who had already managed to obtain a view of the mountain and the citadel.

However he came to his decision, Silva would have had long and intense discussions with his senior officers before and during the march. While he probably came armed with the idea of constructing a siege ramp no one knows if this was actually the case; the truth has been lost over the years.



The remains of the siege ramp.

Roman legionary commanders like Lucius Silva would have been well used to siege tactics. Laying siege to towns and fortresses was a basic skill for soldiers of the empire, almost as necessary and as commonplace as road building. Many believe that while the great

military roads are the most enduring relics of their power, nothing can compare to the sheer magnitude and enormity of the Roman siege machines: "It was in their siege works that the Romans really excelled. Their mastery stemmed mainly from a combination of skill, discipline, energy and sheer doggedness."*

The Romans had narrowed down their siege tactics to just two varieties. Firstly there was the ramp which, along with towers, would be built alongside the enemy walls and, when the time was right, used as a base from which to storm the town. Second choice was a defensive wall around the enemy fortress or town in order to cut it off and force the garrison to surrender.

Siege ramps had been used to great effect by Titus at the siege of Jerusalem. Even Bassus when he was preparing to assault Machaerus had begun to build a ramp, filling in the valley on the eastern side of the fortress. In the event it was not needed and the city surrendered without a fight but if battle had been joined Bassus would have finished and used his siege ramp.

The legionaries always preferred the first style of siege, the direct ramp up to the enemy walls. That way the city or fortress, when it fell, would be open for plunder and they, the soldiers, would have the first pickings. The generals and other officers invariably came down in favour of the defensive wall and a slow, steady siege. The pickings and loot from the captured town would then be theirs.

Lucius Silva had no interest in enriching himself: he was intent merely on taking the Jewish citadel. What he created at Masada was a combination of both types of siege. There were, however, slight variations.

The Masada ramp was not built against a defensive wall; it was built on the incline, as if leading up to the vertical cliffs of the citadel and only in its final stages did it rise to meet the walls of Masada. Perhaps more importantly, the circumvallation wall was not defensive or protective: its purpose was offensive, designed to keep the enemy in.

The ramp and wall were not ends in themselves; they were simply a means to an end. That end was to allow the storming of the Masada citadel. To achieve this Silva would have employed a wide variety of siege weapons including stone-throwing ballistae and arrow-firing catapulta. Above all he intended to use a huge battering ram which, when the ramp was finished, would be moved up to a position opposite the wall. It would then batter down the stone enclosure. He immediately set a small section of his engineers to work on the ram while others began building the ramp.

Where to build the ramp was Silva's first problem. He found the answer within a day or so of arriving at Masada:



Storerooms at the top of Masada. (Ana Paul Hirama)



An onager, a Roman siege engine, cheaper to make and more manoeuvrable than a ballista. (Ad Meskens)

He found but one single place that would admit of the banks he

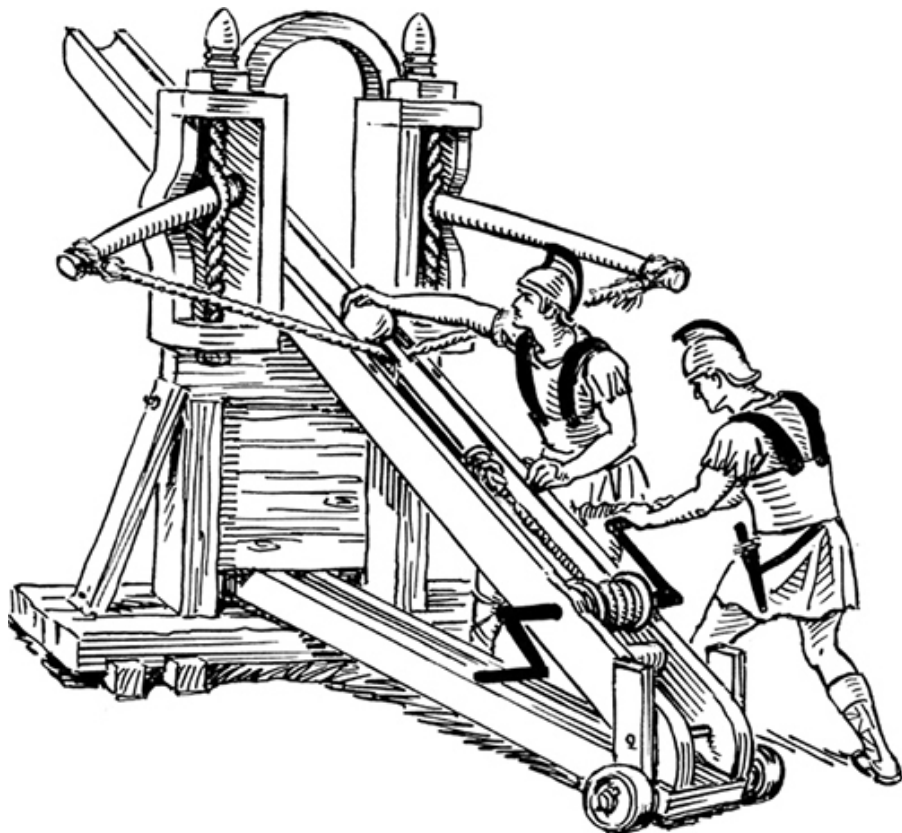
was to raise; for behind that tower which secured the road that led to the palace, and to the top of the hill from the west, there was a certain eminency of the rock, very broad and very prominent, but three hundred cubits [500 feet] beneath the highest part of Masada; it was called the White Promontory.*

Finding the White Promontory was a piece of luck for Silva. It provided a firm base for the start of his ramp, cutting out many weeks of hard physical labour. It would also offer firm footing for the tower and battering ram when they were ready to climb the ramp and go into action.

The ramp itself was positioned on the western slope of the cliff. It was made with rocks and stones as a base or bedrock—not dissimilar to the foundations of the Roman military roads—and then covered with earth, and compacted until it was virtually solid. The work was relatively easy while they were extending the White Promontory, in effect just filling in at the sides of the rock. Timber bracings at the edges ensured that the earth would not fall away. When the ramp got beyond the white rock, however, the going was more difficult, everything then having to be built from scratch.

The ramp or assault embankment was not a vertical structure. It started approximately eighty yards away from the casement wall but that wall was high up on the top of the mountain. So the ramp would have to climb significantly before it reached its target. The incline could not be too great as the tower housing the battering ram was intended to be hoisted or pushed up the slope until it finally reached the wall. That, in itself, would be a difficult and dangerous task.

The ramp when finished measured between 600 and 700 feet in length, Josephus recording that it did not quite reach the wall, ending some sixty feet below the top of the casement. This has given rise to the myth that the ramp was never actually completed. In fact the shortfall is easily explained. To begin with there would have been a platform which stretched from the top of the ramp to the wall. This has now disappeared, destroyed by time and the elements. Secondly, it was on this platform that the siege tower would come to rest. The battering ram was designed to punch holes in the casement wall: to go too high would see the ram simply punching at thin air above the castellations. Soldiers would be able to leap onto the wall, either from the top level of the tower or through the gap that had been created by the ram.



Huge boulders gathered from the surrounding countryside and launched from a ballista, were effective weapons against any fortress.

Some sources state that Silva attempted to storm Masada soon after he arrived. However, Josephus makes no mention of this in his book and the reports of an initial attack are unfounded. There can be little doubt that Silva came with a preconceived plan, one which involved the building of the siege ramp and a tower to hold a battering ram. Nothing was going to dislodge him from this idea.

Naturally Eleazar and his defenders attempted to interfere with the Roman construction. They hurled down stones and fired arrows at the soldiers as they toiled at building the ramp and undoubtedly caused some casualties. However, Silva and his officers were well trained and schooled in warfare and had various means of defending their workmen.



A Roman siege tower, similar to the one used at Masada.

Screens, *plutei* as they were known in Latin, were used to protect workers and were the simplest of devices. They were exactly what the name suggests: lightweight screens made out of wicker that were held on the inside by two or three soldiers. The screens could be as large or as small as was needed. They would have kept out arrow bolts and were covered with untreated hide to keep the men sheltering behind them safe from fire were that to be used against them.



Archers were an important element of any Roman army; they were, however, invariably auxiliary troops rather than legionaries.

A more complex device was the gallery or *vineae*, effectively an open-ended hut, again covered with hide, but as these were mainly used to attack walls they were little used at Masada. In an emergency, soldiers would form themselves into the famous tortoise formation, using their linked shields to protect them from attacks from above, from in front and from the side.

Attack was often felt to be the best form of defence and as the ramp climbed steadily higher, the Romans began firing their own weapons at the defenders. A large number of arrowheads have been discovered in and around the citadel while orangesized stones have also been uncovered in the compound at Masada, evidence of the artillery fire from the Roman ballistae. Again, casualties were caused but the real purpose of the exercise was not to inflict damage on the defenders. Its purpose was to deter the Sicarii: "Throwing darts and rocks soon made those who fought from the walls of the place retire, and would not let them lift up their heads above the works."^{*}

The Roman tactic of concentrating their efforts on just one place was disconcerting for the defenders. As part of Eleazar's preparations his troops had gathered together mounds of heavy stones. These were placed at strategic points around the wall, the idea being to simply roll them down on the Romans as they toiled up the slope.

However, the Roman tactic of concentrating on just one section of the wall made it impossible for the Sicarii to produce or launch any effective counter-pressure. The front was simply too narrow and the rolling stones were never used, apart from in the western sector where they were tumbled down onto the partially built ramp. They had only minimal success at killing or maiming Romans although the effect of

the falling boulders was like a cavalry charge to the minds of the builders.*

It is also possible that painted stones were used by the Romans at Masada. At the siege of Jerusalem the Jewish defenders had been able to see the ballista-fired stones as they flew towards them and, as a consequence of this, take avoiding action. The stones were light in colour and so they stood out against a dark background. The Roman answer was simple. They painted their stones black so that they could not be seen in the air, with, it must be admitted, pretty impressive results.

Covering fire for the men involved in the construction of Silva's ramp was particularly effective. This was where the Roman archers came into their own, thousands of arrows being regularly fired into the citadel. There are no records of how many casualties the archers caused but, once again, the main purpose of the enterprise was not to kill or maim but to force defenders to take cover well away from the walls.

Day after day the work went on. The sun was hot and simply providing enough water for the men building the ramp soon became a major problem. Estimating the number of potential casualties during the building phase of the operation was another worrying matter for the senior officers. Everyone expected men to be killed or maimed in the actual assault. That was an occupational hazard of being a soldier. But having men killed by archers or by rolling boulders while they were building the siege ramp was a different matter altogether. Then Silva or one of his staff came up with a simple but effective answer.

It all came down to a matter of choice. Did Silva want to risk the lives of his soldiers constructing the ramp or did he want to preserve this valuable section of his army for what would undoubtedly be a brutal final battle? Silva was a cautious and, by the standards of the time at least, a caring general who knew that to get the best out of his soldiers he would have to treat them well. There really was no choice.

As the ramp grew longer, inching closer and ever closer to the walls of Masada, the effort of the defenders to dislodge the men working on its surface was bound to increase. The risk of casualties would rise. Why risk the lives of his soldiers when he had at his disposal the ideal men to carry out the work? Silva's eyes turned, inevitably, to the Jewish prisoners of war.



The desert landscape around Masada.

There was also an extra bonus, Silva felt. The Sicarii and the other defenders of Masada had been hurling bricks, stones and arrows at the ramp for days now. But would they be as willing to attack their own people, many of whom might have fought alongside them in past battles? Silva was sure that he knew the answer. It would be no.

The prisoners of war and the slaves were immediately put to work, much to the relief of the soldiers who could now stand by and watch—or supervise as the centurions would have it. Silva was correct in his surmise. The efforts to dislodge the Romans decreased. They did not cease entirely; after all the Sicarii were as content to fight the Jews as they were the Romans and had no compunction about killing men on their own side. But the attacks certainly decreased.

Nobody knows what Eleazar was feeling as he watched work on the ramp proceeding. He would surely have had a sense of impending doom but, as a Sicarius of long experience, he was used to death. So many of his friends and family had already died at the hands of their enemies and he knew what to expect when the Romans finally broke through.

The weather that early spring was relatively benign. It was, however, still very hot and the Roman soldiers suffered badly in their thick red tunics and armour. Worryingly, summer would soon be on them and the older soldiers would have taken pleasure in teasing the newer recruits about the coming conditions, even though it was something everyone would have to endure.

For Eleazar and his men high up on their mountain the heat would have been more bearable. To begin with there was a breeze and the Sicarii were not encumbered with armour like the Romans. And, of course, they were native to the region; they would have been used to

the vagaries of the weather. Everyone knew that summer was a difficult, even deadly, time. It would bring vastly different problems—sandstorms and swirling hot winds that gave no relief, temperatures so high that even the oldest and most experienced soldiers in the legion would feel as if their heads were about to explode. It was another reason why time was short. Lucius Silva knew that he had to get his men off this mountain and out of the desert heat before the sun crippled all of their efforts.

In the meantime he was happy to give his soldiers the time and the freedom to enjoy the delights provided by the camp followers—as long as they did it in their off-duty hours and turned out for the day's work the following morning. Gambling and whoring were the chief delights of the soldiers. The scavenging rat pack that soon established itself around the two larger camps outside the circumvallation wall was more than happy to provide both forms of entertainment. They also drank heavily, these soldiers of the Xth. There was nothing unusual in that, most people did in an age where water was often tainted and unclean. Wine, at least, was unlikely to lay them low with dysentery and other crippling diseases. The legionaries were not paid a huge salary, although it was usually three times as much as auxiliary soldiers. They invariably relied on the bonus paid after a victory to augment their income. It meant that there would have been many outstanding debts in the wine shops and whorehouses around Masada.

While the soldiers lived in their tents, the camp followers had no intention of spending their days in similar basic accommodation. Many of them built themselves substantial huts, as Yigael Yadin discovered during his excavations: “The remains of their shacks may be seen very well in the vicinity of the camps ... where some of them have two or three rooms.”*

During the day, if they were not engaged on the ramp, the centurions and officers kept the soldiers occupied by organizing fighting practice with swords and javelins and by further training in battle techniques. It was all part of keeping the legion at the sharp edge of what was the ultimate killing machine.

They were experienced men, these soldiers of the X Legion, well used to killing and fighting but for Silva and his officers the old adage of “The more I practice the luckier I get” held particularly true. Therefore—practice, practice, practice. And in the evenings, provided they did not draw guard duty, the delights of the camp followers would be waiting.

For the men and women up on Masada there were no similar distractions. Waiting and watching were their tasks, all the time

knowing that the ramp was getting closer and the final assault could not be far away.

* Connolly, p. 31.

* Josephus, Book 7, [Chapter 8](#).

* Ibid.

* Yadin, p. 222.

* Ibid, p. 220.

7. ASSAULT

Lucius Siva's assault ramp was completed and ready for use by the beginning of April 73 CE. The siege tower and battering ram were finished and available at the same time and were carefully moved into position at the bottom of the ramp. A sense of urgency began to grip the camp as everyone now sensed that General Silva was intending to waste no more time.

The men of the X Legion were happy. There was, admittedly, the prospect of a hard battle to come but at the end of it they would be finished with this damned country and on their way back to Jerusalem where there would be pay and, hopefully, a large bonus waiting for them. Nobody knew what was coming after that, not even General Silva, but everyone lived in the hope that they might get a transfer to somewhere cooler and less dangerous. If anybody deserved it, thought the men of the Xth, they did.

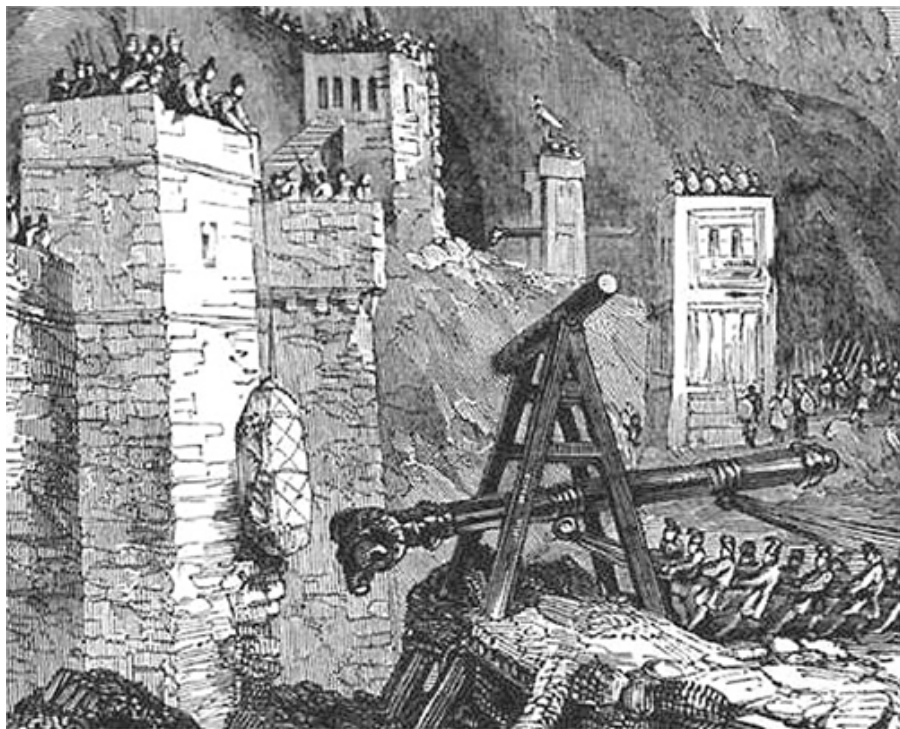
Eleazar and his followers would have looked down from the heights of Masada and viewed the Roman war machines with trepidation. They knew what damage such weapons had caused at Jerusalem. They had no real measure of defence against such formidable pieces of equipment and it was clear that raw courage was not going to be enough, not this time. The Sicarii certainly had good cause to be concerned.

The tower, in particular, was an amazing piece of work. It had been built by superb engineering, made even more remarkable by the conditions around its construction and the unhelpful environment. Standing eighty feet high, it had a series of landings or platforms on the inside, each with openings to discharge soldiers. On every level, inside and outside its walls, there were platforms for archers and stone-throwing ballistae but it was in the degree of protection that the tower gave to its soldiers that the uniqueness of the structure could be seen.

As well as screens covering the dangerous or open parts of every section and level, the whole of the tower was sheathed in iron. The engineers had spent weeks hammering in nails to keep the sheets of metal in place. Nothing it seemed, not fire, not rocks, not arrows, would be able to defeat such a creation. While Eleazar frowned, Silva

must have smiled in delight; he was taking nothing for granted but he knew that this tower gave him the best chance of a quick victory.

The ram was nothing new; it was simply a development of the ancient but effective old-world technique of using a large tree trunk to batter a hole through a wall. The Romans, of course, had developed the use of battering rams to a fine art. Made from sturdy timber, Silva's ram was suspended inside the siege tower by ropes which gave it the freedom to swing back and forth. The final six foot or so of the ram—or the beam as it was sometimes known—was made of iron. This was typical of Roman siege machines and often the final iron section of the Roman ram was cast in the shape of a ram's head. However, this particular ram had been built in a hurry. It was a purely functional weapon and there is nothing on record to say that the Masada head was finished in this way.



A Roman battering ram, this one complete with ram's head at the front.

During the early days of April Eleazar and his men carefully kept their eyes on the tower. The longer they waited the more their anxiety grew. For a brief period, a few hours, no more, the tower remained inactive at the foot of the ramp and there were several suggestions that a small force might venture out to burn and destroy it. Eleazar

knew that such a suggestion was impractical; the tower would be guarded like the gates of Rome itself. And so they waited. Nerves twitching, they watched the stationary tower and the preparations of the soldiers hurrying in and around it. The wait seemed to go on for years. Then, finally, with a rumble like distant thunder it began to move.



The Northern palace. (Bukvoed)

To some extent it was a relief. Things were finally happening. Everyone knew that inside the structure sat hundreds of soldiers and that it would take a miracle to save the occupants of Masada now. But Eleazar knew also that he would fight and his followers would fight too. For them there was no other way.

The battering ram was situated on the bottom level of the tower and was operated by soldiers from the X Legion who would swing it back and forth until it acquired enough velocity to slam into the wall and cause damage.

Like most rams this example was a truly awesome weapon. Anyone who had ever seen one in action knew that a battering ram shook the walls of its target for hundreds of yards each side of the strike point. Each and every time it struck home the whole edifice of the wall or fort or whatever it was attacking would shake violently.

As the Sicarii watched, the tower was slowly hoisted up the ramp, pulled and pushed by the Jewish prisoners of war who were being whipped and beaten by the legionaries every time their efforts slowed.

Gradually the tower inched towards its optimum height. Ernest K. Gann in his novel of the siege—*The Antagonists*—gives a vivid and compelling description of the effort needed to move the tower up the ramp:

There were on this same rope one thousand Jews ... on the opposite side of the ramp another thousand Jews and these were also bent backwards with their bleeding heels dug into the flinty surface of the ramp. And they too pulled on a great rope which was as thick as a man's forearm. As these two columns of force inched down the ramp so did the heavy assault tower creep upward, for the ropes ... were led through a system of blocks and tackles.*

There is no record of how long this took but the tower must have moved very slowly and the journey from the bottom to the top of the ramp might even have taken as long as two or maybe even three days. Exhausted men dropped, several died—there is no record of how many—but the journey of the tower and the ram carried on inexorably.

Now, as the tower came ever closer to its target, the fighting intensified, Jewish defenders hurling stones and arrows down at the Romans. Silva's men, however, enjoyed all of the advantage of the tower. It gave them protection and the superior number of Roman archers and javelin throwers meant that the Sicarii and their allies were soon forced to fall back from the ramparts.

Stone-throwing ballistae added their weight to the attack, firing from the siege tower and from other locations at the foot of the mountain. It was a powerful assault that left no one in any doubt that the Romans meant to finish off the garrison.

It was not just the men in the tower. They might be the vanguard but the tower held only a fragment of Silva's army. The rest of them were lined along the ramp behind the siege tower, waiting patiently for their units to be called to replace the men who would have already gone over the wall. They were anxious, but all of them were eager for the combat and for their share of the pillage that would follow.

According to the story as told by Flavius Josephus the tower and ram arrived outside the casement wall and immediately began the process of smashing a breach in the defensive structure. From there the story becomes a little confusing.

In the account given by Josephus the outer casement wall was breached on 15 April. And there seems little reason to doubt him. The

casement wall had been recently repaired by the Sicarii but it was old and not able to withstand too long any sort of prolonged battering from the ram.†

The noise of the ram constantly smashing into the wall, the cries of dying men on both sides of the defences, the clash of accoutrements and shouted orders would all have been confusing for anyone who witnessed the breach. It would have been something that stayed with combatants for ever—but it has to be remembered that Josephus was not there and he obtained his information at second or even third hand. The objectivity of his reporting can therefore be viewed as a positive rather than a negative factor.



The Israeli flag, with the Dead Sea in the background. (Sarah Murray)



A wonderfully atmospheric but historically inaccurate painting that shows the Romans and the Sicarii fighting at the top of the siege ramp. The painting is part of a mural at the modern cable-car station.

Despite its age, the casement wall remained a mighty obstacle and while the ram was powerful it was still manpower and physical strength that operated the giant beam. It took several hours of constant battering but eventually the wall began to crumble. A few more swings, a few more decisive blows and they were through.



The Masada Medal.

And then, with a huge hole hammered into the outer casement wall, the attacking Romans suddenly found themselves confronted by another barrier. This was a second wall but one that was remarkably different from the first. Josephus commented: “The Sicarii made haste, and presently built another wall within, one that should not be liable to the same misfortune from the machines as the other; it was made soft and yielding and so was capable of avoiding the terrible blows that affected the other.”*

Given the style of construction that Josephus goes on to describe it is highly unlikely that the Sicarii could have built this second wall in ‘haste’ once they saw that the casement had been shattered. Far more likely Eleazar ordered its construction the moment he realized the Romans intended to use the battering ram. It would have taken two or three days to create the second defence line and would have been a more useful way of employing the defenders’ time and energy than simply ordering them to throw bits of tile and rock down onto the

labouring Romans.

This interpretation might destroy the dramatic and popularly accepted image of Eleazar and his men working feverishly at the new defence work while others held the Romans at bay but it is the only realistic possibility. Even so, the work was still done at remarkable speed:

They laid together great beams of wood lengthways, one close to the end of another, and the same way in which they were cut. There were two of these rows parallel to one another and laid at such a distance from each other as the breadth of the wall required. And earth was put into the space between these rows.*

Another set of beams was laid over the top of the structure, Josephus calling the defence work “a real edifice”. Apart from the enormous baulks of timber, the key to the success of the inner wall lay in the tons of earth that were packed into the space between the large beams of wood, as the Roman operators of the battering ram were about to find out.

Having achieved the initial breakthrough, the ram was now turned on the second wall but this time there was to be no immediate success. In fact use of the battering ram was counter-productive as the earth and wooden wall simply absorbed the effect of the ram. Josephus sums up the failure and an unexpected side effect most succinctly: “When the machines were applied the blows were weakened by its yielding and as the materials by such concussion were shaken closer together, the pile by that means became firmer than before.”†

Whether or not Eleazar had the technical knowledge to create such a structure will never be known. But somebody inside Masada certainly did. In its own way this second wall was as much a magnificent feat of engineering as the creation of Silva’s siege tower.

Standing now on the top of the tower Silva, with all his Roman general’s experience and knowledge of siege warfare, immediately ordered a halt in proceedings. He knew that something was wrong and that he would have to change his tactics. He could not afford to wait too long, however, as every second’s delay offered the Sicarii the possibility of a counterattack. And so he quickly came to a decision: they would use fire to destroy this second obstacle.

Arrows were wrapped with rags soaked in pitch and the Roman archers fired them into every inch they could see of this second wall. The arrows were augmented by burning torches thrown by the

infantry and it was not long before the dry wood and earth of the wall were ablaze. The heat was searing like the desert sun but the Roman assault troops sat, protected and secure, inside their armoured tower and waited for the flames to do their job. And then the elements took a hand.

When everything seemed be lost Eleazar was granted a second chance. The wind suddenly veered around and instead of kindling the fires on the wall, drove the flames directly back onto the Roman siege tower: “The wind was there, the April wind that comes from nowhere and everywhere, that runs around the desert like a puppy; in every direction. It was strong ... blowing the wall of flame straight back at the tower, licking and roaring at the soldiers like the very breath of God.”*

Sudden changes of wind direction were—and still are—common enough in this part of Judea but to Eleazar and his followers it was the hand of God reaching out to protect his people. None of them needed proof of God’s wisdom and care but just in case there were a few doubters, this sudden change of wind direction was surely God’s greatest gift.

The Roman soldiers fell back in the face of the burning onslaught, trying desperately to save their siege machines and their lives. Many of them made a quick exit from the tower’s lower floors, running for safety and disregarding the shouted orders of Silva and his officers. If it had been the efforts of God that had caused the wind to change and the flames to alter their target, now when the Roman cause seemed lost the Divine Being changed his mind again. And this time he seemed to be favouring the Romans. The wind veered once more, behind the siege tower now and driving the flames back onto the wooden wall with even greater intensity than before. Within a few minutes the entire structure was engulfed in flames and General Silva felt able to breathe easily once more.

If we are to believe Josephus the Romans, rather than move in and finish the job, now decided they had done enough for the day. They returned to their encampments, shouting obscenities up at the wall and promising the Jewish defenders that they would return the following morning when they would duly kill everyone left standing.

If this is true it was an amazing decision from Silva or whoever issued the orders. The logical decision—indeed the only military decision that would have made any sense—would have been to immediately charge into the citadel and put what remained of the garrison to the sword. Shaye Cohen, writing in the *Journal of Jewish Studies*, speaks for many when he asks a simple question: “This is

incredible. Why withdraw when victory is so close?"†

Clearly the Romans should have pressed home their advantage and attacked through the breach in the wall. They had Eleazar on the run but for some reason, Josephus says, they withdrew. According to the Jewish-Roman historian the most they did that night was to mount a guard to ensure that none of the Masada defenders should slip past them in the darkness and escape into the desert wilderness. The decision to retire only makes sense when you remember that Josephus was creating a work of literature as much as history. It was not exactly fiction but Josephus was happy to twist the facts in order to increase the dramatic effect. Yet this was not the main purpose of his misuse of the facts.

His hidden agenda was to criticize the activities of what he considered extremists, in this case the Sicarii. While Josephus might consider Eleazar a brave and valiant man, the rebel leader was certainly an extremist.

Josephus's dramatic account of the breaching of the wall and the forthcoming suicide of the defenders of Masada depends on one thing: that Eleazar ben Ya'ir be given the time and opportunity to make his famous impassioned plea to his followers and, ultimately, to the whole of Israel. If it did not happen in reality Josephus would make sure it did in his writings. Consequently posterity, for some years at least, belonged to Josephus and his version of events. What Josephus the writer, as opposed to Josephus the historian, needed was to give Eleazar time to make his speech to the remnants of the garrison, to convince them about what they should now do. It was a simple matter or mathematical equation as far as Josephus was concerned. No time + no speech = no legend.

From a literary point of view the Sicarii leader needed both the space and the opportunity to address his followers. Without those, the story as told by Josephus would have made no sense at all. Something had to give and as far as Josephus was concerned that something was the truth. Eleazar needed time. Josephus would give it to him.

He could not have done that in the few moments between the burning of the wall and, if they had acted according to all the rules of war, the arrival of the legionaries on the ramparts. In order to facilitate this Josephus rewrites history to make the implausible possible. Fact and fiction clearly run easily together in this particular instance.

The Romans may well have gone in as soon as the flames destroyed the second wall—but not in the work of Josephus. And as his is the only contemporary account of that final, fatal night people have

usually accepted his words at face value. Fact or fiction, the stage was now set for Eleazar's big moment.

* Ernest K. Gann, *The Antagonists*, pp. 245, 246

† Josephus, Book 7, [Chapter 8](#)

* Ibid.

* Ibid.

† Ibid.

* Kossoff, p. 194.

† Cohen, p. 386

8. DECISION DAY

If we take Josephus at his word, the Romans retired to their encampments after breaching the walls of Masada on the evening of 15 April. Their day's work had been successful and arguably they felt that they were entitled to a few hours' rest. For Eleazar and the others up on the top of Masada there was going to be no rest. They had important decisions to make.

Eleazar apparently made two speeches to his followers that night. His words were simple and his message even simpler:

Since we long ago resolved never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God himself ... the time is now come that obliges us to make that resolution true in practice ... As a favour that God has granted us, it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom.*

He went on to detail what he believed God desired of them. For many of those who stood in the open courtyards and on the terraces of Masada that night it was a message that appealed. But the idea was not for everyone and while there were those who listened in wonder, there were also those who heard the words of Eleazar with horror. He was graphic in his descriptions and in his intentions: "Let our wives die before they are abused, and our children before they have tasted of slavery; and after we have slain them, let us bestow that glorious benefit upon one another mutually, and preserve ourselves in freedom, as an excellent funeral monument for us."†

In some respects that is the message of a noble and defiant patriot. The words can also be looked upon as the ranting of a fanatic, the exact effect Josephus wanted to achieve in his writings. Josephus acknowledges that many in the audience disagreed. They looked wistfully at their families and told Eleazar that they would not commit such an outrage.

Suicide and murder—because that was what it would be if they killed their wives and children, then themselves—were prohibited under Jewish law and many of the dissidents took refuge behind this fact. Josephus calls them "effeminate" and despite his distaste with the fanaticism of the Sicarii, there is a distinct feeling that he is

looking down on the dissenters and viewing them as weak.



The Negev, still militarized—and dusty—after two millennia. (Grand Parc, Bordeaux)

Eleazar, having been interrupted in his discourse by those who disagreed, was now afraid that the “effeminate” ones would affect the others. He decided that he needed to speak again.

This time he reproached the assembly for what he called their cowardice and emphasized the indignities that would befall the wives and children when a “man’s hands were bound”. The exhortation went on for some time as Eleazar warmed to his theme. The key to its success lay in the repeated threats of what the Romans would do to the families once the men were captured or killed on the walls.

According to Josephus the effect of the speech was electric. Everyone was now convinced that Eleazar’s suggestion was the only way to cheat the Romans of their victory: “Now, as Eleazar was proceeding on this exhortation, they all cut him off short, and made haste to do the work, as full of an unconquerable ardour of mind, and moved with a demonical fury.”*

Those were the words of Josephus, not the Jewish defenders of Masada. There was still a degree of uncertainty in the citadel. Talking about making such an end for themselves and their families was one thing; in many respects it was little more than an academic argument. Putting it into practice was something entirely different.

Eleazar’s next proposal offered one way around the dilemma. Each family head would kill his own family and then nominate or choose a small group of men to kill them, the family heads who had carried out the original executions. These would be the last survivors. Having taken care of all other males they would then dispatch each other until eventually only one man would be left standing. He would be the only one to actually commit suicide but his sin, given the nature of the

task, was bound to be forgiven. The proposal was accepted and lots were drawn to see who would carry out the grisly task.



A synagogue on Masada. (Bukvoed)

During his excavation of the Masada site in the 1960s Yigael Yadin found eleven pieces of pottery or *ostraca*, each inscribed with a name. Ben Ya'ir was scrawled on one; other names included Ben ha-Nahtom, ha-Amki and Yo'av. In the absence of paper or parchment these shards of pottery, Yadin concluded, were the lots used to determine exactly who would carry out the executions.

Ben Ya'ir can only have been Eleazar and the other names, while unknown to posterity, might give some indication of the men who fought at Masada. It is entirely possible, the only drawback being that Josephus in his telling of the event states that ten men were chosen, not eleven. There is no explanation for the discrepancy.

However it came about, ten men were chosen and the families dispersed to spend their last moments together, in prayer or in simple contemplation. It would have been a haunting and distressing final few minutes for everyone, the committed Sicarii and the more gentle Sadducees, the women and the men. Many of the children would have been too young to realize exactly what was happening but they would have picked up the tensions and the fear in their parents.

Josephus waxes lyrical about what happened over the next few

hours, giving vent to his natural distaste, not by railing against the action but by making each death moment as pathetic and as sentimental as possible. It is easy to imagine staid Roman matrons in the comfort and security of their villas at Capri, Pompeii or on the hills above Rome weeping bitterly at his words, exactly the effect he had aimed for: “The husbands tenderly embraced their wives, took their children into their arms and gave the longest parting kisses to them with tears in their eyes.”*

Having killed their wives and children, Josephus says, the heads of each family then lay on the ground with their arms around their loved ones and offered themselves to the ten executioners.



Archaeologist General Yigael Yadin with American actor Edward G. Robinson.

Before the killing began Eleazar had ordered his men to burn the fortress. Everything was to be destroyed apart from the food supplies. This was deliberately done to show Silva that the defenders of Masada still had the ability to live but had chosen death to slavery.[†] Smoke from the fires mingled with that from the smouldering and still burning wall but it does not seem to have affected the Romans who remained, resolutely and perhaps blithely ignorant in their camps.

According to Josephus the fires within Masada were begun by the last survivor of the massacre, almost a last act of absolution before he followed the others into death:

Finally, the nine offered their necks to the executioner, and he who was the last of all surveyed the other bodies, lest perchance someone among so many who were slain should want his assistance to be dispatched. When he perceived that they were all dead, he set fire to the palace, and with the great force of his own hands, ran his sword through himself and fell down dead near his own relatives.‡



Israeli stamps honouring Masada.

Fact, fiction or information gleaned from other sources, the origin of Josephus's story remains unclear. It would have been a mournful, unhappy vigil for this last survivor, padding around the citadel with only dead bodies for company. If we accept the rest of his tale this ending is at least a possibility and is certainly atmospheric.

The following morning, awakened by the standard bugle call, Silva's legion assembled at the foot of the ramp and at their general's orders began to tramp up towards the breach. All of them were surprised when they saw that no urgent or immediate repair work had been carried out on the breach. They expected to be met by a hail of arrows or bricks but there was nothing. When they had scaled the tower and climbed across the platform they were utterly astounded by what they saw. It was, Josephus wrote "a citadel of death ... They saw nobody as an enemy, only a terrible solitude on every side with a fire

within the place as well as a perfect silence. At length they made a shout, as if it had been a blow given by the battering ram, to try to see whether they could bring anyone out who was inside.”*

The only response to their call came from two women who had chosen to hide themselves in one of the cisterns along with five children rather than face the executioner’s knives. They were the only survivors which meant that 960 men, women and children had voluntarily offered themselves for suicide in Masada.

Much of what Josephus wrote about the night of suicide and murder must have come from these two women who were probably interviewed by the man himself or by his scribes in the days and weeks after the massacre. It is highly unlikely that they would have remembered Eleazar’s words verbatim so the two speeches would have been pieced together from the accounts of the women, the soldiers and, of course, the vibrant and vivid imagination of Josephus himself.

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That, at least, is the traditional explanation of what happened, as described by Josephus. Initially accepted at face value, the story has since been doubted and come under increasing criticism.

The obvious weakness is the failure of the Romans to press home their attack once the second wall was down. Believing this part of Josephus’s story is really all about suspending disbelief but, from a dramatic and literary point of view such a delay was necessary if the speeches of Eleazar and the combined decision or agreement to die are to be accepted.

Josephus was a Jew. He might have taken on Roman ways and Roman traditions but he was still a Jew. Born in Jerusalem in 37 CE he came from a priestly family and had studied with the Pharisees, Sadducees and the Essenes. He eventually decided to align himself with the Pharisees but the call of Rome had proved too strong. Nevertheless he remained a Jew and in all of his writing about the Jewish War he was always less than critical of his people’s stance.

The Sicarii, on the other hand, were perfect examples of the fanaticism that threatened the stability and order of the Roman world. It was a threat that Josephus hated. He wanted to cast blame for the war and for the continuation of the conflict after Jerusalem had fallen not on the Jewish people as a whole but on violent revolutionaries—in other words the Sicarii.

Fanaticism such as that displayed in the story of mass suicide and the death of nearly a thousand people? It should have been

guaranteed to destroy any last vestiges of support for groups like the Sicarii. That at least was what Josephus wanted. That was why he invented the story of Eleazar's speeches and the inevitable result.

If we take this view it becomes clear that Josephus was lying or at best using literary licence in his account of the final hours of Masada. There can be no doubt that the story told by Josephus is dramatic and heart-rending. It would have been exactly what any author would have wanted to create. But it does leave us with the huge dilemma: How much else of the wonderful tale he spins is also fiction?



These days access to the top of Masada is usually achieved by cable car. This view from above the car gives a good indication of the height of the rock and the desert below.

Indeed the whole question of the mass suicide is then brought into question. There is no evidence, apart from the account of Josephus, that such an event ever took place. The Romans certainly assaulted and captured Masada but what happened to the bodies of the 960 supposed victims?

Only a handful of skeletons have ever been found on the mountain; first, a small family group of three in one of the palaces where Josephus says all of the killings took place. Then a larger party of twenty-five bodies was discovered in a cave on the southern edge of

the plateau. Of these fourteen were adult males. Their build was different from the rest of the skeletons—soldiers perhaps?

Were these the remains of Romans or Jews, Sicarii or Zealots? The presence of pig bones alongside the skeletons has led anthropologists and forensic experts Joe Zias and Azriel Gorski to claim that that they were Romans who had been captured by the defenders. It is, of course, guesswork.

The disposal of the other nine hundred or so bodies remains a quandary. It is possible that they were buried in a mass grave somewhere down on the desert floor, unmarked and still waiting to be discovered. It is also possible that the Roman legionaries in the months and years after 73 CE simply threw them over the parapet to the desert floor where they would have been devoured by scavengers and wild animals.

Many modern historians now believe that the end when it came was certainly not as organized and orderly than Josephus would have us believe. The idea of a calm and quiet acceptance of death was simply Josephus weaving his magical words around the events of that terrible night.

Some people committed suicide, historians now say, some fought to the bitter end. Once again, there is no proof that this alternative version of the end is any more truthful than Josephus's account. Archaeological evidence has shown that Josephus did actually manage to get several details wrong. Those errors are mostly about the fabric and structure of Masada.

Josephus believed—and he certainly wrote—that there was only one palace on the mountaintop, the northern one. In fact there were two. The heights of rooms and walls he quoted for this palace were also wrong. The conclusion drawn from this is that if he could be wrong about the dimensions of Masada he could also have been wrong about the fate of the garrison. Once again we come down to speculation and individual judgement.

One thing remains clear, however. As with many similar episodes from history, events such as the fall of the Alamo, Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo or the British disaster at Isandlwana in the nineteenth century, the build-up to disaster may have been prolonged but the final act was mercifully short.

The Sicarii and the refugees had been installed at Masada for three years. They had endured siege from Silva and his soldiers for almost three months. The final assault took only a few hours.

* Josephus, Book 7, [Chapters 1-8](#).

† Ibid.

* Ibid.

* Ibid.

† https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Masada.

‡ Josephus, Book 7.

* Ibid, Book 7.

9. QUESTIONS ANSWERED—OR NOT

No one will ever really know what happened up on the heights of Masada on the night of 15/16 April 73 CE. Given those facts that we are aware of, everyone has to make his or her own judgement on the way events unfolded. Ultimately, it comes down to just three choices.

Firstly, everything happened exactly as Josephus described it, a mass and mutually agreed suicide of everyone in the fortress. The second choice is diametrically opposed to that: the Romans attacked as soon as the wall was breached, charged across the ramp and killed everyone in the citadel. And thirdly, when the Romans finally entered Masada on the morning after the breach was made they found no one there. The defenders had escaped during the night.

Each of those options has its merits and each of them has drawbacks that are equally as significant. They are all worth consideration. While the idea of mass suicide rather than slavery or death in battle has an emotional appeal, the story that Josephus presents has so many holes that critics could spend hours picking it apart. Chief amongst them, of course, is the supposed decision of the Roman army to retire for the night once the breach was created. Retiring to sleep for the night was something that no general worth his salt would ever do and simply does not make any sort of sense.

Knowing what we do about the character and military capabilities of Lucius Silva— and that, admittedly, is very little—it is difficult to imagine him making such a foolish and dangerous move. Josephus, however, leans heavily on this theory, even calling on divine intervention to help him with his case—although which divine being he is referring to remains unclear. As if it was the most natural thing in the world Josephus states: “So the Romans, having now gained assistance from God, returned to their camp with joy and resolved to attack their enemies the very next day.”*

Help from God, he claims, and the Romans, unlike the Jews, had several gods they could call on. Even if there was no help from whichever God they worshipped, leaving the field of battle when the contest was there to be won, seems a strange, not to say fatal, mistake to make.



The mighty walls of Jerusalem that kept Titus and his troops at bay for many months.

The second option—a swift and immediate attack by the X Legion—is more logical. However, it is not quite as simple as it sounds and would have been a very dangerous move. The breach was relatively small and therefore any Roman attack would have had to have been on a narrow front, perhaps no more than three or four abreast. The Sicarii, well used to warfare and killing, would have been able to easily defend such a narrow aperture, for a while at least, until casualties began to mount.

With Roman soldiers eventually pouring through the gap it is quite possible that at that point many of the defenders and their families chose to commit suicide rather than be taken alive. That may even be where the legend of the mass suicide first began to grow.

Option number three is perhaps a little spurious. We are talking of 960 men, women and children slipping out of the fortress under cover of darkness and through a doubly strengthened line of Roman defenders. Some may have escaped but many would also have been taken prisoner or killed and that would have involved noise and destruction. For the idea to have any chance of serious consideration such an escape plan would have had to take place in small groups, perhaps three or four people in each. Given those circumstances fleeing defenders could possibly have made their way down the hidden tracks on the northern flank of the mountain without being

noticed.

Anything more than small parties would have been immediately seen by the Roman guards and the alarm given. No matter how tired the soldiers were, skirmishes at the foot of Masada during the night would have alerted Silva and forced everyone to leave their beds and grab their weapons. There is no mention of any fighting at all during the hours of darkness. Not even Josephus could have ignored such an event and so it is more than likely that a mass escape—or even a series of smaller ones—over the walls of Masada never occurred.

Possibly, just possibly, what happened was a combination of all three options. So, a suggestion: the Romans continued with their attack once the wall was breached. Many of the defenders were killed but some, mainly the non-combatants who were acting on a previously agreed plan, committed suicide rather than fall into enemy hands. One or two managed to slip away, scrambling down the slopes of the mountain which, at that stage did not have guards at the bottom.

It is all surmise, guesswork based on a little knowledge. And that, of course, is dangerous. But then, many historical judgements have been made on even less information.

The story of Masada has attracted its share of critics over the years, particularly in the last decade or so. Many of those who deny the massacre use archaeology to support their case. A report published in 2016 says that the siege ramp was never completed while other ‘experts’ state that the ramp was too narrow to ever take a siege engine like Silva’s tower. It is all interesting debate and still nobody has come up with a definitive answer or alternative to what happened.

At the end of the day the writer and researcher is left lamenting that nobody apart from Josephus wrote or compiled a contemporaneous and informed account of the events. If only.

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In the wake of the massacre Lucius Silva did as he had vowed. He established a small garrison on the top of Masada and left them there when he marched back to Jerusalem. The garrison remained in place for approximately forty years, one of the duties of the soldiers possibly being the disposal of bodies left over from the siege.



Boulders gathered by the Sicarii with the intention of being rolled down the cliff faces at the enemy as they attacked. Most of them were never used.

It was hardly a pleasant or welcome posting for the legions, sitting out their period of service in the heat and dust, but at least the fortress and the men who manned it never again had to become involved in anything like the Masada affair.

In the years after the fall of the Roman Empire a Byzantine monastic settlement was established in the fortress. Presumably the remote and desolate location appealed to the cloistered emotions of the monks. The monastery was dissolved in the sixth century and the site lapsed into a quiet and undisturbed peace that lasted for thirteen centuries.

The remoteness of the site meant that the hilltop palace and fortress were left more or less untouched by human hand or by nature for two millennia. For archaeologists and historians that was something of a blessing. The palace and fortress were 'rediscovered' in 1828 and the legend of the Masada massacre, forgotten for centuries exactly like the actual location of the event, came back into circulation once more.



Carmen, performed on Masada. A dramatic show against a dramatic backdrop. (Yossi Zwecker / israeltourism)

The Sicarii more or less vanished after the massacre. It had always been a small sect and with most of the members perishing on Masada there were precious few of them left alive to continue with their

bandit ways and murderous activities. The name of Eleazar ben Ya'ir was recorded in *The Jewish War* by Josephus but very few, apart from historians and academics, ever bothered to read the volume. It was not until the rebirth of interest in Masada in the mid-nineteenth century that Eleazar became known again and since then he has become a symbol of bravery, ingeniousness and courage.

A translation of *The Jewish War* was published in 1923, sparking yet more revitalized interest in the idea of the mass suicide of the Sicarii. That same year a portion of Yitzhak Lamdan's epic poem *Masada* was also published, the full version coming out in 1927.

The poem views Masada as a last refuge, not a call for suicide, with Lamdan using Masada as an allegory for the creation of new Jewish settlements in Palestine and as a home for the Jewish people. It is an important distinction. Suicide was the last thing on Lamdan's mind. Lamdan's opening lines—"Open your gates Masada and I, the refugee, shall enter"—are matched by the conclusion, "Masada shall not fall again." Refuge and a place of safety; that was what the Masada of Lamdan's poem (Palestine in the metaphor) was meant to represent, a place of refuge defended by heroic warriors such as Eleazar ben Ya'ir.

We do not know at what stage of the assault Eleazar died. Did he perish fighting with the last of his supporters on the citadel wall or did he commit suicide? If Josephus was right and the mass suicide of the Sicarii did actually take place, it is tempting to picture him as the final man left alive. Like so much of the story, Eleazar's fate remains unclear, shrouded in mystery.

Following the massacre there were minor Sicarii uprisings in Egypt and Cyrene in North Africa but these were easily squashed by the Romans. After that the movement simply disappeared, becoming linked and confused in the minds of most people with the Zealots. Murderous and cynical, morally corrupt, they were the original terror organization but above all they were bandits and outlaws of immense ferocity and purpose.

Lucius Flavius Silva did not get to go home, at least not initially. He remained as governor of Judea for a further eight years, all the while believing—and sometimes stating—that while Masada had been the last vestige of the Great Revolt, it had been as much a symbol as a threat. The implication is that Masada did not need conquering but Silva was doing himself an injustice. The citadel of Masada did not fall easily and it needed a man of Silva's ingenuity to plot and plan its downfall.



The soul of Israel is encapsulated at Masada. (IDF)

In January 81 CE Silva did finally return to Rome, hoping to enjoy the luxuries of his villa outside the capital. As he had feared he received no Triumph but Titus, who succeeded his father as emperor that same year, was pleased to have his support in the political maelstrom that was Roman government.

Silva served two terms as consul and enjoyed the patronage of the emperor but the days of Titus were numbered. He reigned for only two years before falling victim to a mysterious fever. He died shortly afterwards and with him went Silva's position in the hierarchy of Rome.

Titus was succeeded by his brother Domitian who was an undoubted tyrant. He was also emotionally disturbed and probably mad. Silva seems to have disappeared from view at about this time, possibly falling victim to Domitian's reign of terror which he unleashed soon after becoming emperor. It was a cull that wiped out many well-respected generals and politicians who Domitian feared might one day become rivals for his throne.

As with many of the other generals Silva's accomplishments were denigrated in the reign of terror. His name was removed from monuments and plaques and he was effectively written out of the history of Rome as quickly and as surely as any failed Soviet statesman in the late twentieth century. Within fifty years hardly anyone in the empire knew his name, a sad and unpleasant end for a man of his ability and skill.

All of which leaves us with one dilemma unsolved—what is the real meaning of Masada? In some respects that is an easy question to answer, in others it is virtually impossible.

Following the expulsion of the Jews from Judea in the second century CE the Jewish people became a wandering sect, spread across the four corners of the known world and liable to attract abuse from all types of nations and individuals. Anti-Semitism spread as quickly as the Jewish people themselves, a hatred without cause or meaning. World history is littered with examples of crimes against the Jews.

Modern Zionism, a movement of Jewish people who supported and still support the establishment of a Jewish homeland in the historic land of Israel, began in the late nineteenth century, not long after Masada re-emerged from the desert wastelands. Theodor Herzl in his book *Der Judenstaat* envisioned exactly what the Zionists desired, an independent Jewish state. It was a reaction to the growth of anti-Semitism and the sweeping paranoia of the many nationalist movements of the time.

As the Zionist movement grew in size and stature, the Masada story gained increasing significance. Supported by Herzl's book and by Lamdan's poem, it was soon accepted in much of the western world, symbolizing Jewish heroism, courage and strength, three qualities that Jewish people were going to require in some depth in the brutal twentieth century. It did not stop the hatred, particularly in countries like Nazi Germany, but Zionism did point the way ahead and provide a degree of hope for the future.

The Holocaust, where six million Jews perished at the hands of the Nazis requires no explanation but the feelings of anger at the perceived betrayal by the British government probably does. The British had taken on the Palestinian Mandate after the First World War and quickly found themselves in a situation where they could please neither side, not the Jews nor the Arabs.

By the time of the First World War Palestine was under the remit and control of the Ottoman Empire and soon became a bargaining tool in the delicate game of politics that was being played in the Middle East. The country was little more than a pawn and Britain, in particular, was unrelenting and totally dishonest in its promises.



The Israeli Defense Forces Armored Corps is sworn in at Masada. Here the swearing-in ceremony for the Karakal Battalion is being held at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. (IDF)

Britain and France both needed the Arab people on their side. They were valiant and fearless fighters against the Turks, as the exploits of T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) and the Arab armies that he organized had shown. And yet financial support from the worldwide Jewish community was also an important factor, as necessary to Allied victory as the physical presence of the Arabs. It was a delicate balancing act that politicians and the military leaders alike tried hard to maintain—not always in the most moral of fashions.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 called for “a national home for the Jewish people” within Palestine while, in the years after the end of the war, the League of Nations Mandate supported the idea of establishing the Arab Emirate of Transjordan, an area that covered most of what was still Syria. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne saw the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the province of Palestine being ceded to the League of Nations. The League then delegated the responsibility for this part of the Middle East to the still-powerful British Empire.*

With Britain holding or overseeing the Mandate for Palestine, keeping the Arabs and the Jewish people content was something of a poisoned chalice throughout the 1930s. Trying to please both sides of a debate never works, as the British quickly discovered.

Both the Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations stressed the idea that a Jewish homeland should be created “within Palestine”. It

was not intended, the British said, to cover the entire Ottoman province. The Arab peoples felt immediately betrayed by a nation that they had trusted and whose promises they believed. Now that same nation was instrumental in giving away their territory. The Jews felt equally as let down. They, after all, felt that they had been promised a homeland through the Balfour Declaration, not just part of one. And so the tension grew.

The British had to deal with the Arab Revolt (1936 to 1939) and, in the final stages of the Second World War, what became known as the Jewish Insurgency. This latter conflict transformed itself into the inter-state war between Israel and the Arab states after 15 May 1948 when the Palestinian Mandate expired, the British withdrew and the new nation and country of Israel was established.

In 1947 the United Nations, having replaced the largely ineffective League of Nations, advocated the creation of three separate regions. It was, in effect, a partition plan for Palestine, creating an Israeli state, an Arab state and a special region for the religiously important cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It was a suggestion that pleased no one, least of all the Arabs and the Jews.

And the British, where did they stand on the issue? The answer is nowhere. Having endured bomb blasts and murder, abuse and ridicule in the press and in debate forums like the League of Nations, they were more than happy to escape the restrictions of the Mandate and leave for home to deal with the disintegration of their empire.

In the first Arab-Israeli War the newly created state of Israel faced attacks from three powerful nations, all of them far stronger than her: Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Ten months of hard fighting saw the Israelis emerge victorious. It had been a courageous and determined performance, one that was destined to be repeated several times in the years ahead.

The first twenty years of the Israeli state were dramatic and difficult. To begin with there was a huge demographic change with 700,000 Palestinians fleeing or being expelled from areas that had once been theirs but had now become part of Israel. At the same time in a period of just three years well over 500,000 Jews emigrated from their birth homes to the new country and made their homes there. They had to be housed somewhere and the obvious answer was to take over the houses, farms and land of the Palestinian Arabs. All of which simply fuelled the determination of the Arab nations that surrounded Israel to fight and win back the country.

And that was where Masada came in. Faced by overwhelming odds Israel needed the 'backs to the wall' belief in themselves that the

Masada story signified. The final line of Lamdan's poem—*Masada shall not fall again*—became symbolic of the fight for survival.

There are many in Israel who still cling to that view. They still feel threatened, under attack and standing alone against misguided enemies. On the other side of the debate, for many of those who have grown to see the concept to be a dated one, holding hard to the story is seen as looking backwards rather than attempting to shape a new Israel.

There is an emotional dilemma in Israel known as the Masada Complex—a feeling of being walled up inside a fortress or citadel with doom inevitably approaching and no way to escape. It is an apt description of what many Israelis still feel. Yet no one should ever forget the past. As someone once wrote, those who ignore their history run the very real risk of seeing the mistakes of the past repeat themselves.

Zohar Tsofnat, an historian, PhD student and licensed tour guide in Israel, is one of many young Israelis who now see the Masada story as important but mainly as a part of history:

Masada is an important historical site, no doubt about that. You can look at it, at what happened there, in many different ways—as the last station of the Jewish rebellion, as a symbol of courage, as a piece of Israeli history. But the story is not universally accepted. There are no examples of suicide in Jewish history. There are plenty of battles, defeats and victories, but suicide does not lie comfortably with many Jewish people.”*

Tsofnat's comment about suicide being alien to the Jewish people is an interesting one. It may well have been a foreign and unknown concept to the Jews but it was something that was well known to the Romans. From Brutus and Mark Antony to emperors like Nero, Roman history is full of important figures that chose to end their lives on their own terms.

Even Shakespeare alludes to the practice and its origins when, with defeat and ruin threatening, he has Macbeth consider his options and then declare “Why should I play the Roman fool/ and die/on mine own sword?”

If the examples of Roman generals, senators, poets and politicians deciding to end their lives rather than face ignominy are legion we do need to consider the origin of the legend. The supposed mass suicide on Masada comes from the pen of a man who had embraced the Roman way of life, which might, perhaps, give a hint at the way his

version of the story was always going to end.

Debate has raged for some time now. But even for those who regard the Masada story as dated and out of time there is still something special about the mountain and the tale, whichever version of it you care to accept:

Everyone in Israel knows the story, everyone has heard of Masada. Hearing about it, as I suppose we all have, is nothing unusual but there are still people in the country who have never visited the place. It's not easily accessible, like the Wailing Wall and unless Masada means something special to you getting there is a long and tiring process. I see it as a symbol of the fight for independence, as something involved with the beginning of Zionism. It's an impressive place but one that makes me sad—sad but proud.*

The well-known practice of Israeli soldiers holding their swearing-in ceremony on top of Masada was initiated by army general and defence minister Moshe Dayan. It never included all Israeli troops, being confined to only the Armoured Corps, with the young soldiers making their oath at night by the light of blazing torches and concluding with the traditional call of “Masada shall not fall again.”

Times change and the ceremony is no longer held on Masada. A similar event does still take place at several other locations but the special significance of the hilltop fortress no longer applies.

Ultimately, if you believe or disregard the story of Eleazar and the suicide of 960 of his followers, it does not matter. The willing mass suicide on Masada remains a fascinating story, one that appeals to the heart more than the head. If it really did happen it must have needed courage of an extraordinary degree, courage that should never be mocked or denigrated. Of course we will never know the truth but as Hollywood once had it: “When the legend gets bigger than the truth, print the legend.”

What matters is the symbolic nature of the mountain and what went on there in 73 CE. It is a symbol of man's courage and determination not to give in to powerful bullying forces. And that applies whatever nation you come from.

* Josephus, Book 7, [Chapters 1–8](#)

* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Mandate_for_Palestine.

* Interview with Zohar Tsofnat.

* Ibid.

10. EXCAVATION

Having been ignored and virtually forgotten for nearly two thousand years, when they were eventually located once more the fortress and palace of Masada were an earthly paradise for archaeologists and historians. In the early nineteenth century the link between archaeology and historical research was in no way, shape or form anything like the combination that exists today.

In many respects, it can be claimed that the 'rediscovery' of Masada kick-started the interest in ancient ruins as places of learning, as opposed to being just pretty and romantic places to visit. From there grew that combination of skills which are so important to modern historical study.

In 1838 two typical Victorian antiquarians and tourists, Mr E. Smith and his travelling companion Edward Robinson, were in the village of Ein Gedi on the Dead Sea when their attention was drawn to the faraway rock formation that the Arabs called el-Sebbeh. They were immediately interested and sat down to study the rock, having been told by the Arabs that the place was surmounted by a plateau. More importantly, the locals told them, there were substantial ruins on the top of it.

The two scholars viewed el-Sebbeh with growing fascination, fixing their telescope on the sections that the Arab guides indicated. With excitement pulsing in their veins they noted the ruins. As the Arabs had said, they were substantial. But Smith and Robinson were also able to pick out the remains of other buildings on the plateau. This had clearly been a place of note and after discussion the men were confident in declaring that these had to be the remains of Herod's palaces and that this was indeed the ancient and supposedly lost fortress of Masada.

The two Americans did not actually get to stand on Masada. In fact they never got closer than el-Sebbeh having been told that the mountaintop fortress was inaccessible. However, a little later the missionary S. W. Wolcott and the artist William Tipping read Robinson's account of their visit and decided to travel to the area and see for themselves. Wolcott wrote about the fortress and Tipping produced a series of engravings showing Masada as it was in the

nineteenth century. In an account typical of Victorian explorers and travellers, part historical overview, part travelogue, Wolcott was later to write: "We encamped at the western base; and after resting a little made the ascent from the same side, and accomplished it without difficulty, using occasionally both hands and feet ... This is the only spot where the rock can now be climbed."*

From that point on Masada was reclaimed for the world and over the next hundred years a series of explorers and early archaeologists visited the ruins, attempting to learn as much as they could about the mountaintop fortress and palace. As early as 1848 American naval officer J. W. Lynch, who was exploring the Dead Sea by boat, sent a party of sailors to examine the rock and declared that the holes on the northwestern cliff were not caves, as most people believed, but reservoirs.

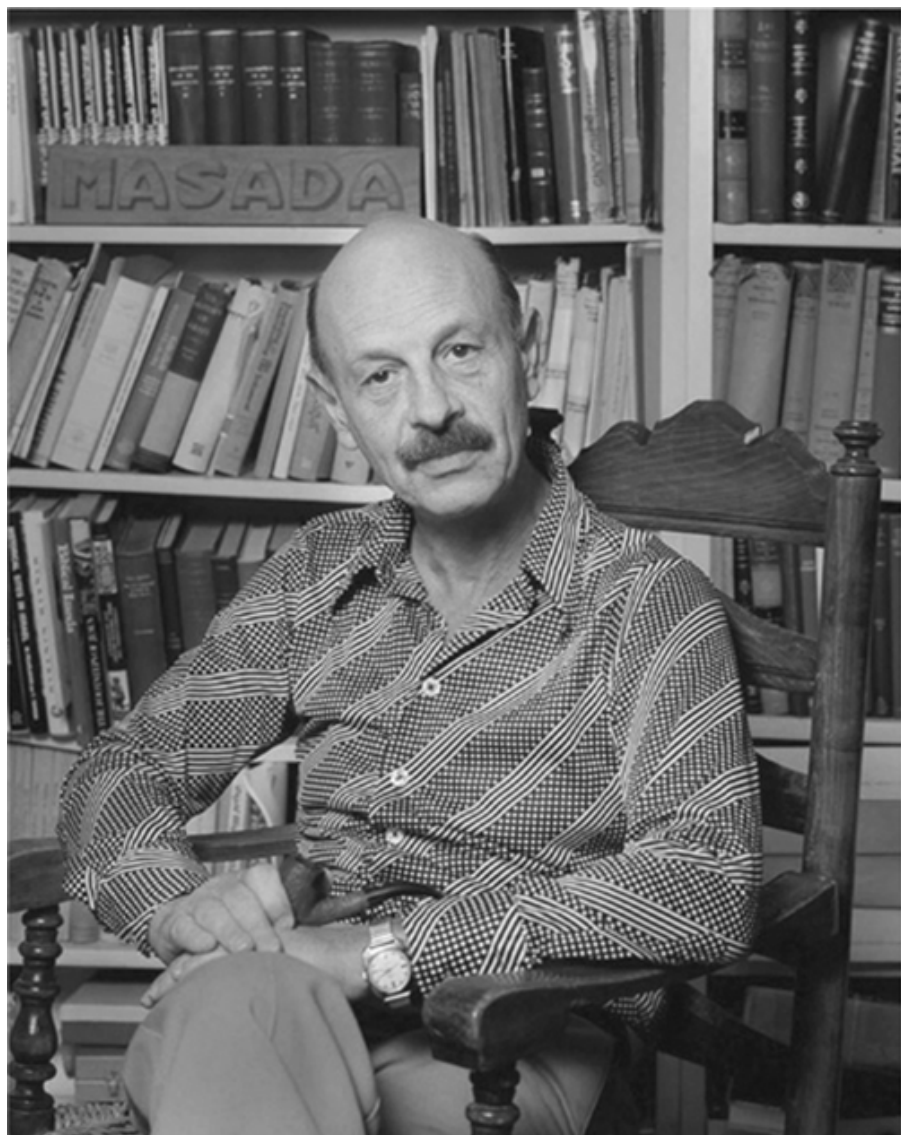
The sailors, incidentally, were the first of many subsequent visitors to enjoy rolling or throwing stones off the sheer cliffs to watch them bounce or smash to pieces on the desert floor below. Fortunately for posterity other visitors did not just enjoy the strangely relaxing business of rock destruction which even Professor Yadin later declared was a strangely fascinating pastime. Visitors, many of them experts in their fields, came to explore the fortress and the rock and soon added to the knowledge that was being gleaned about Masada. The one thing that everyone said was that it was amazing how accurate Josephus had been in his writings. At some stage, it was stated, Josephus must have visited Masada although no one seemed able to offer a possible date for such a visit.

In 1867 the Palestine Exploration Fund sent a party to spend time on Masada. They were the first to correctly identify the Snake Path but perhaps more importantly members of the expedition noted the sudden wind changes and severe weather conditions that sometimes battered the mountain. Lucius Silva would have certainly agreed with them.

All of the visitors across the years commented on the Roman camps and circumvallation wall which were still visible in the desert below the rock. Time and the activities of mankind had barely touched them; even the 'rock rollers' noted that none of their falling stones ever managed to reach the camps, which shows the skill of the Romans in placing their encampments just out of reach of the enemy up on the mountain. Excavation of these Roman encampments was a natural extension to work on Masada.

Perhaps the most significant archaeological exploration of Masada was carried out by Professor Yigael Yadin from October 1963 to May

1964 and again from November 1964 to April 1965. With a team of 300 volunteers and specialists, Yadin's long and extensive exploration of the site confirmed that the main buildings on the rock dated from the reign of King Herod and that the Byzantine monks who inhabited the rock in the fifth and sixth centuries built a small chapel in which to hold services. Yadin found plenty of arrowheads—one with part of its wooden shaft still attached—and ballista ammunition but next to no bodies of the supposedly suicidal Sicarii.



Yigael Yadin, the archaeologist who carried out the most in-depth excavation of Masada.

From the beginning of the dig Yadin and his team were looking for human remains, all the while assuming or half-believing that the post-siege Roman garrison had disposed of them “for sanitary reasons”. Three skeletons were found in the main palace, probably a family group that had perished on the last night. The largest group of skeletal remains that Yadin discovered was in a cave on the southern slope: “It was in one of the smaller of these caves that we came upon the stark sight of skulls and other parts of skeletons scattered in disorder about the floor. Among the bones were fragments of linen and pieces of clothing.”*



The cable car/ aerial ropeway.

At the time of the discovery Yadin was not sure if these were the remains of Sicarii and Zealots, of soldiers from the Roman garrison or some of the Byzantine monks. Later investigative work by the Hebrew Medical School found that fourteen of the skeletons were male, six were female, four children and one embryo. The adult remains were of people aged between twenty-two and sixty apart from one man aged over seventy. Given this evidence Yadin was happy to comment on the remains: “They can be only those of the defenders of Masada.”*

What Yadin did mention at the time were the climatic conditions on the top of Masada. He noted that it was extremely arid up on the heights, something that undoubtedly helped in the preservation of

artefacts. Amongst other things pottery, wood, leather, even human hair from the period in question, has been discovered. There were also shekels and hundreds of bronze coins from the time of the Great Revolt lying in amongst the ruins, many of them bearing the inscription 'Freedom for Zion'.

Below the floor in the synagogue Yadin and his team found portions of fourteen scrolls, "Biblical, sectarian and apocryphal". These included chapters from *The Book of Deuteronomy* and various chapters from *Ezekiel*. According to Yadin from the perspective of scroll research and study of literature from the Second Temple period these were the most important discoveries at Masada.*

Charred beams, the result of Eleazar's decision to burn the fortress, were also found. There was even a selection of food remains—dates, walnuts, salt and pomegranates— that had been left behind by the Zealots. Pottery, most of it smashed and broken, was in abundance, including vessels made out of dried dung.

The Mishrah, an early legal code based on five books of the Old Testament, mentions the existence of such items and their use by the Jews. Unlike ceramic vessels, items made from dung cannot become ritually impure, hence their value to an intensely religious group of people like the defenders and refugees of Masada.

*

These days Masada is visited by thousands of people every year. Most of them complete the ascent by the cable car which now makes the journey to the plateau considerably more comfortable than trekking up the Snake Path or following Silva's route up the White Promontory. In 2001 Masada was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site and it has since seen more visitors each year than it did during the whole two-thousand-year interregnum when the place lay dormant and unrecognized.

Archaeology has sometimes clashed with the words and the work of Josephus. That is fine. Nothing stays the same for ever and new discoveries or interpretations can only help to develop our understanding of the past. Historians—and archaeologists— would surely not want it any other way.

We are lucky that Masada remained untouched for so many years. It has enabled in-depth study of a site with clear and firm links to the past to be undertaken. Relatively few changes or alterations had been made to the defences and buildings which appear very much as they would have done in the days of Silva and Eleazar. Only time and the elements have interfered with the fortress.

Without that period of what might appear at one level to be neglect, things would have been very different. The destructive nature of mankind would have plundered and ripped the place to pieces as surely as the Sicarii and the Romans tried to do in 73 CE.



A Roman Triumph, c. 1630 by Peter Paul Rubens. A very busy interpretation.
(National Gallery, London)

The gap or hiatus has enabled the discovery of so many artefacts from the time of the Great Revolt that archaeological teams have sometimes been threatened with an overwhelming array of ancient objects. Many of these can now be seen in the Masada Museum at the foot of the rock, a sublime and fascinating link to the siege and a time two thousand years ago when life was certainly very different from today.

* S. W. Wolcott, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 1 quoted in Yadin, p. 231.

* Yadin, p. 193.

* Ibid, p. 195.

* Ibid, pp. 187, 188.

CONCLUSION

Whichever way you look at it the story of Masada is one of raw courage in the face of overwhelming odds. In its own way it is as memorable as the Battle of Britain and while Eleazar and his Sicarii followers were certainly not the noble heroes that posterity has tried to paint them, there is a certain heroic quality to their last stand.

They could have run for safety somewhere in the desert long before the legions appeared at the foot of their mountain, slipped easily and quietly away into the wastelands. They didn't, they chose to stay and fight, not because they thought they could win but because they knew no other way. For the Sicarii and the Zealots, their day was over, their time had passed. And they knew it.

With a relentlessness that mirrored their battle tactics and the terrifying solidity of their marching, the Roman legions and the Pax Romana were bringing stability and security to the world. It may not have been the type of security that the Zealots and Sicarii wanted; in fact it was the antithesis. And that was the rub.

The days of banditry and violent revolution were coming to an end, admittedly under the thumb of the cruel and often brutal Roman Empire but that appeared to be what most people in Judea wanted. Or so the Sicarii thought.

None of the men and women on Masada ever imagined they would become a symbol of courage and defiance for the Jewish people. They were simply doing what they did best: fighting. If it was God's will that they should die, very well, they would die bravely and free. The Sicarii mantra 'No Lord but God' held true, right to the end of the siege. That message has sometimes been forgotten, lost in the telling of the tale.

And yet, like all legends, their story has grown and been embellished many times over the years. Poems, novels, films, the Masada story has been offered to the people of the world time and time again and the people of the world have grasped it with both hands. As a symbol it has few equals.

Whether or not you believe the story of the mass suicide is, frankly, immaterial. What matters is the stoic nature of the defenders, their refusal to bow down before a stronger and more dominant foe.

The result of the siege and the eventual storming of the Masada citadel was a foregone conclusion, right from the start. The Roman army was far too strong for a mixed group of religious fanatics and bandits but that did not deter Eleazar and his men. If there is a moral to the tale it has to be there, in that refusal to admit defeat and to fight to the bitter end.

The desire never to be taken prisoner or enslaved by the Romans is understandable. And that might, conceivably, have led to the Sicarii and the others putting knives to their own throats. It might also have provided them with the urge to fight on until the end. We will never know. Like so much of the story, in the end it becomes a matter of personal belief and choice.

The story of Masada died with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. The legend was brought back to life via the rediscovery of the rock—not that it had ever gone away—sheltered and protected in its desert surrounds, and by the late nineteenth-century growth of Zionism.

In times of need, as in the Jewish fight for their homeland in the years leading up to the ending of the Palestine Mandate and after independence was achieved in 1948, Masada was always there. The need to protect the infant state of Israel from outside interference saw no decline in the importance of the Masada legend; if anything it grew more significant, more important.

Whatever the threat it has been the perfect symbol. Whatever is thought about it now, when Israel had a need the Masada story was there to use and to give comfort to a besieged and threatened people. That may not have been what Eleazar ben Ya'ir envisioned when he made his last stand but history has a habit of taking events and portraying them in markedly different ways.

The line “Masada shall not fall again” became, in the 1930s, something of a slogan for the far right political groups and later for the various youth movements in the country. Its significance was also felt outside Israel. Yitzhak Lamdan's poem *Masada* is said to have been a major inspiration for the ghetto uprising in Warsaw in 1944. The uprising may have ended in disaster but it is, in its own way, as significant as the Masada siege itself.

However you look at it you cannot escape the simple fact that Masada is a symbolic metaphor for Israel, for its people and for everything that the Israeli state represents. That is what makes the story so compelling. That is why we need never to forget it.

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Interview

Zohar Tsofnat (April 2018), copy held by author

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A child of the desert in the melting pot that is the Middle East: a Bedouin girl photographed in 2015. (Osama Awny)

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